

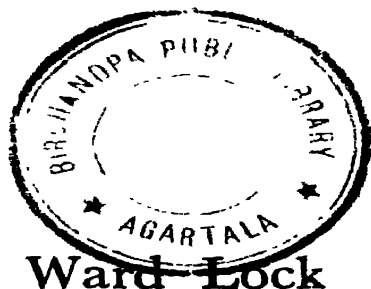
THE CLAW OF A CAT

Take the beauty of Sydney's harbour, add a luxury yacht, some apparently care-free and happy people, a cat, a corpse, and a murderer. Shake up well with lots of sunshine, then stir in an attractive redhead and the young Detective-Inspector, Trevor Nichols, with his friend and assistant, Tom Burton. Drop the last two ingredients into the harbour for an underwater sequence. Drop the cat into the same element, and the result is—trouble; for who may deliberately outrage a cat with impunity? They have their own secret ways of taking revenge, have cats. Nothing obvious. Nothing plotted and planned. But oh, murderers—*beware the claw of a cat!*

The part The Old Salt played, the rising doubts and fears and suspicions, are cleverly handled in this tense, swift-moving mystery novel.

GEOFFREY PETERS

THE CLAW OF A CAT



Ward Lock

AND COMPANY LIMITED

LONDON AND MELBOURNE

Geoffrey Peters 1904
2268

MADE IN ENGLAND

**PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
BRISTOL TYPESETTING CO. LTD.
BARTON MANOR - ST. PHILIPS
BRISTOL 2**

CHAPTER I

DETECTIVE-INSPECTOR TREVOR NICHOLS of the Sydney Criminal Investigation Bureau was looking anything but a policeman at the moment. He had just come back into the clubhouse of the Pacific Underwater Club at Bondi Beach, with a sizeable blackfish dangling by its gills from his fingers, flippers still on his feet and mask pulled up on top of his head, a pair of brief swimming trunks dividing the even tan of his sturdy body, and water dripping from the whole as he made his happy way towards the changing rooms after handing his spear-gun to Joe Blake, the resident custodian of the club.

It was Sunday, and the inspector's day off; all he had to do was take a shower and change into comfortable slacks and a sweat-shirt and he could drive home in his beloved Sprite to the apartment he shared with Detective-Sergeant Tom Burton, his friend and assistant, who knew a thing or two about cooking blackfish.

The inspector's whistle was merry indeed as he enthusiastically began to put this admirable programme into operation. He had reached the sweat-shirt stage when Joe pushed his grizzled head around the door and called, "Hey, Trev—phone for you."

"Oh no!" groaned the younger man, his pleasant, ordinary face screwing itself up with dismay. "Okay. Coming."

He swung his six feet of solid disgust in the wake of Joe

Blake until he reached the telephone still swinging by its cord from the wall connection.

"Nichols here," he clipped into the mouthpiece.

"Trev?"

It was Tom's voice and Nichols's heart sank still further. That meant work all right. Couldn't crime lay off for just one day in the week?

"What is it, Tom?"

"Lovely juicy corpse, boy," was the enthusiastic reply. "And where do you think?"

"In the morgue," was the sour response.

"No! Right on that lovely motor-yacht you've always raved on about. The one in Thorn tree Bay."

"What?" incredulously.

"Well, it wasn't there when the corpse became a corpse. It was anchored off Balmoral somewhere, but they brought the yacht back home with the corpse on board—and they're both over there now, awaiting our attention."

"Sounds first-rate," came a laconic mutter from the inspector. "Why us, may I ask?"

"Seems that Carter, the lucky so-and-so who owns the boat, rang up about it and when he told the desk clerk where and how the bod was found, they turned it over direct to the Big Boss as a matter of course."

"What is it, then? Murder, suicide, accident . . .?"

"Could be anything. I've only got the bare details as yet."

"Let's have 'em, then."

"Bod is an Italian, male, and guest on board the yacht. Correction. Was. Looks to be drowned without complications but there are some nasty scrapes down his chest which could be accounted for by the fact that he was found jammed amongst the propellor blades—motor-yacht, see?"

"Ouch!" Trevor winced. "Chopped about is he?"

"No. Luckily one of the party found him there before they had started the engine again. It appears that he, the finder, just happened to be swimming along when—Bam! Nose to nose with a corpse. All on board seem mystified by the position of bod when found. Still, regardless of possible sharks—they

were in the open harbour at the time—they bravely hopped into the water to work him free," Tom droned dramatically. "Then they hauled him aboard the lugger and headed for home—and us."

"It's Sunday—and it's my day off," the inspector stated firmly.

"Hey! Don't you hang up! Are you there?" asked Tom anxiously.

The inspector grinned into the phone.

"I'm here, sucker," he replied. "You don't think I'd let you get aboard that yacht without me, do you? I take it the Boss has tossed it into my lap, anyway?"

"Yep. It's all yours."

"Okay. Get the gang together and over there. I'll pick you up at the Point. What's the name and address?"

"Name of Stephen Carter, seventeen Benelong Crescent, Thorntree Point. It's that gorgeous hunk of house right on the harbour's edge."

"Stop drooling," his superior officer recommended. "Who is this Carter?"

"Manager of the Gordoni Motor Works, Australia, Limited."

"Aha? Any connection with the Italian now defunct?"

"Defunct was the son and heir—just out from Italy—on holiday, the man said."

"Interesting. Who else was on board? Give me something to think about while I drive to town."

"Carter, his wife and daughter, and guests."

"Is that all you've got?"

"So far."

"Full of information, aren't you? Okay. I'll be with you in half an hour or thereabouts. I'll have to put our ten-pounder in the fridge out here, I suppose," he concluded with disgust.

"What did you say?" gasped the voice on the other end of the line.

"You heard me. Ten-pounder—blackfish—and I'm starving!"

"Just our luck!" groaned Tom.

"It'll keep," grinned the inspector. "The corpse won't. Get cracking."

"Okay, Trev, though how you can talk about the two in the same breath . . .! Off now," he concluded hurriedly, lest he lose the last word.

Nichols hung up, still smiling, and swung away to change once more into his business suit—second best and kept at the club for just such an emergency as this.

Threequarters of an hour after Stephen Carter had reported Gordoni's death to the authorities, the inspector was parking his car behind the more conventional police car which had arrived before him outside number seventeen Benelong Crescent, Thorntree Point.

The house was built in the popular pseudo-Spanish style, two-storeyed with a high wall masking it off from the street. An arched doorway gave the tradespeople an entry to the back of the house while, to the right, a driveway swept up to a porticoed front door.

Instead of driving directly up to this, however, the inspector left his Sprite in the street and knocked on the back door. He liked to know where everybody and everything could be located before he settled down to work.

One of his plain-clothes men opened to his knock.

"Ah, Mac—where's everybody?"

"Waiting for you in the hall, sir."

"Any trouble?"

"None at all."

"Right. Stay put until I call you off and don't let any newshounds in to snoop. We don't know what we've got here yet."

The plain-clothes man grinned.

"Rely on that, sir," he said reassuringly. He knew the inspector's views about the Press—they had their uses at times but *not* until the inspector gave the word.

Nichols nodded with an answering grin before walking down to the main entrance and so into the drive.

Another of his men was placed strategically just inside the

gates. He, also, received a nod and a grin before the inspector stooped to scratch the ear of a wild-eyed tabby sitting in the middle of the drive licking away desperately at her fur.

"Hi, puss," Nichols greeted her companionably. "You're in a bit of a mess, aren't you? Been having a bath?"

The cat's fur was spiking out all over her in sticky tufts and she continued licking at it frantically yet, all the while, keeping an inquisitive eye on the visitor who had now straightened up to look across the well-kept lawns to the harbour beyond.

"What a view!" he murmured involuntarily.

House and grounds occupied the whole of Thorntree Point where it reached out into the wide expanse of Sydney Harbour like a finger at the stretch trying to touch its counterpart jutting out from the opposite shore. From here, the inspector could see straight down the long view to Rose Bay before the southern shore turned away to hide behind Bradley's Head. A few yachts were idling along there. Coming out of their various anchorages for the afternoon races, he supposed, sighing enviously. No corpse to interfere with *their* day off! Ah, well—sooner begun, sooner ended. On this thought, he bent to give the cat a final pat on the head before turning towards the front door.

It was wide open and in the hall Detective-Sergeant Tom Burton, tall, rangy and inclined to slouch against anything that would hold him up, waited surrounded by a group of hard-bitten faces belonging to the men who formed Nichols's team: the photographer, Bob Grey, festooned with the tools of his trade; the fingerprint expert universally called 'Jacko' owing to his resemblance to a bright-eyed monkey; and a couple of silent, strong-arm types for any rough work, Jones and Corbett.

Burton's face broke into a sympathetic grin as he caught sight of Nichols.

"Hard cheese, chum!" he said. "But look where I've got you!" He waved a hand around the hall, then his voice dropped confidentially. "And wait till you see the daughter! Wow! Red hair, blue eyes, and a figure—brother!"

"Business," Nichols pulled him up with mock severity. "Where's the Doc?"

"Still going over the Boy in the Bikini in there." Tom nodded towards a closed door on the left of the hall before nodding towards another on the right in front of which Jones was standing guard. "The rest are in there. We've only been here for ten minutes. Waited for you before we did anything else."

Nichols had screwed up his nose with wry distaste at Burton's first words.

"Boy in the Bikini? Can't you just call it the body?"

"Don't like the word. Reminds me too much of work."

"We'll get on with some nevertheless," Nichols informed him crisply. "The rest of you blokes stay put till I see if you'll be needed. Right?"

The team nodded and, with the exception of Jones, immediately flopped down untidily over the bottom steps of the staircase leading to the upper floor and groped for cigarettes.

"The body," the inspector indicated to Tom firmly.

Tom sighed lugubriously and opened the door on the left.

"If you must!"

The room proved to be the dining-room with a man's body now occupying the table. Beside it a round cherub of a man, holding a sheet in one hand and a pair of bathing trunks in the other, stood peering thoughtfully at the dead man's feet.

The inspector nodded to the doctor while Tom craned interestedly over his shoulder at the unclothed body lying on the table.

"Good day, Doc," said Nichols. "What is it?"

"Nice lot for you. Drowned, cuts on chest and abdomen, crack on base of skull, bruised ankle. I left him uncovered. I thought you'd want to have a look at him."

The inspector's face turned a trifle sour.

"Want is not the word I'd have used. Still . . ." He moved in closer, then grunted with surprise. "Mmm . . . muscular! Funny. I hadn't expected that."

The doctor chuckled.

"All Italians aren't the willowy kind, you know. This one'd

be a great success with ladies who admire the smooth, tanned-torso type, I should think. Can't account for those scratches on his chest by putting 'em down to female fingernails, though. Too deep."

The doctor looked so disappointed that the inspector grunted a brief laugh.

"Don't let your sense of the romantic run away with you, Doc. What caused 'em—in fact?"

"I've seen barnacles do such damage. But . . . found around the propellor I'm told? Don't usually find barnacles on a propellor blade, eh?"

The inspector's eyes narrowed keenly, but he merely said, "Ah?" and waited for the doctor to continue.

"Yes—barnacles," muttered the doctor, absent-mindedly handing the inspector the pair of trunks he was holding while he placed his hand around Gordoni's bruised ankle, studying where his fingers gripped in relation to the bruises which were darkly defined. "Mm-numm? Mm-numm! You see?"

The inspector saw.

"At some time somebody held the deceased's ankle rather tightly, Inspector."

Tom Burton began to whistle soundlessly but otherwise maintained silence, although the angle of his hat over his eyes indicated to one used to his ways that he was thinking deeply.

"And drowned," remarked Nichols.

"The P.M. will show us how much water is in the lungs, but I think you may fairly assume that he was drowned after the bruises were inflicted and after the crack on the skull. Slight contusion there—not enough to kill him—probably blunt etcetera."

"Not accidental, you think?"

"I don't know how much more you think a murdered corpse should have! The P.M. may show something else, however. But I couldn't sign a death certificate for natural causes without violating every oath I've ever taken. He has all the appearance of a man knocked out then held under until he drowned. Someone wasn't going to trust to those muscles

getting him out of trouble. The cuts? Well, it's up to you to find out about those."

"And it was all done in broad daylight with hundreds of bathers about?" Tom put in, softly and thoughtfully.

"Must have been," the doctor nodded, shooting Tom a bird-like glance vivid with intelligence for all his round cherub-like appearance. "He could not have been dead more than thirty minutes at the outside before he was found if there were still faint signs of blood from these cuts, as I am informed there were. Salt water, of course, but—no. Not more than thirty minutes before he was found, Inspector. He hasn't been dead over three hours even now."

The inspector sighed.

"Let me know it all as soon as you can, will you, Doc?"

"Will do," nodded the little man. "Shall I get him off, then?"

"Yes."

The doctor instantly hustled out into the hall without another word with the inspector and Tom Burton following.

Once there, however, the doctor paused irresolutely.

"Where's the phone, laddie?" he asked Tom, Tom being the one who always knew the exact location of everything, useful or otherwise, on the scene of a crime at the first possible moment.

"Just there behind the stairs, Doc," he directed.

"Ah!" The doctor pounced. "Won't be long now."

The inspector turned his attention to the stair-rail as an anchor for his thoughts. So it was murder, then, and . . . pre-meditated? Or on the spur of the moment? What matter? he shrugged, it was murder, and he looked down at his team with a wry grin.

"Well, you harpies, it looks as if your Sunday siesta is up the spout. Tom, tell the blokes on the gates that no one is to come and go except the doc and the corpse. Okay?"

"Back in a tick."

Tom vanished through the front doorway and Nichols returned to the team who had now scrambled to their feet ready for action

"Jacko—get some prints, if any, from his body in there. Try the bruised ankle in particular. Bob—snap him before the doc takes him off. Particular attention to cuts and bruises. More later. Corbett, you stay in the hall and keep an eye on things. Jones—stand by and be ready to come with me when I take off down to the harbour. There's a yacht involved and I'll want you to stick by it."

The doctor finished his telephoning and appeared at the inspector's elbow.

"There's a patient for me upstairs, I believe, Inspector. Mrs. Gordoni's in a bad state of shock, I'm told."

The inspector nodded. "Right—but don't put her out unless you have to. I'll want to question her soon."

"Leave it to me."

The doctor picked up his bag and puffed upstairs as Tom Burton hurried back into the hall.

"All serene," he reported brightly, before jerking his head towards the living-room door. "Going to break the glad tidings to the family?"

"To those who don't already know," the inspector nodded. "You'll find a handy corner and follow the chit-chat in that filthy shorthand of yours as usual, I suppose?"

"Any complaints," replied Tom expressionlessly as he opened the door, "should be addressed in triplicate to the Chief—"

"Nuts!" hissed the inspector quietly as he walked into one of the pleasantest living-rooms he had seen for a long time. Large plate-glass windows opened out on to a patio, with the surrounding lawns edged with oleanders and gum trees through which the harbour was reflecting its flickering light on to the ceiling of the room.

Nichols blinked appreciatively for a second before his eyes wandered down to the upturned faces of the people awaiting him with that slightly defensive, slightly awed, expression the general public seemed to keep especially for the police, he thought ruefully.

"This is Detective-Inspector Nichols, Mr. Carter," Tom was saying.

A tall, well-built man rose out of an easy chair and came towards him with outstretched hand.

"Good afternoon, Inspector," he said. "I rang up about this awful business."

Nichols looked at him with interest. Good-looking, prosperous, easy-mannered, he tucked away in his mind for future reference.

"Oh, yes?" he replied. "How do you do?"

Tom immediately effaced himself and went to lean against the closed door, bringing out of his pocket a small notebook and pencil which he camouflaged behind his soft felt hat. He had noticed early in his career that people answered the inspector's questions more freely if they did not see their every word being taken down—perhaps to be used in evidence. So, if he couldn't get out of their direct vision, his hat came into play, as now.

While these preparations were in progress, Carter was introducing the rest of the party to the inspector.

"This is my wife, Inspector. And my daughter, Susan."

Nichols looked from the remarkable blue eyes of a young-looking woman with blue-black hair into their identical twins in the face of her daughter, a girl with red hair as Tom had said, but red with what a difference! It was alive with golden lights that spoke of long hours in the sun. The hair from her father, the eyes from her mother. What a combination! He liked the cool lemon dress she was wearing, too. Set off the pale sun-tan which was all a redhead could ever hope to attain. He went on to wonder how she had managed to escape the inevitable freckles until he noticed the faintest dusting of them on her nose, and he smiled his attractive, lopsided smile at her suddenly.

This drew an involuntary, but still wary, smile from the girl in return and—was her expression just a little less awed? he wondered. Was there a little more speculation, for instance? He found himself hoping she liked what she saw, anyway.

Could he have read Susan's mind at the same moment, he might have been relieved on that score.

She had been aware of a stab of interest as soon as the

inspector had entered the room. His smile had given this a considerable boost. Now she was thinking that no one with sandy hair that stood up every which-way in defiance of the latest French clip and who possessed such a marvellous sun-tan could be as obnoxious as she had feared a member of the C.I.B. would be. And that smile . . . ! Much of the horror she had felt ever since she had heard that death had touched the *Sea Spray* lessened somewhat, which accounted for the fading wariness in her eyes.

It was with difficulty that Trevor Nichols turned away from her to meet John Kelleher and his wife.

Kelleher, Carter was explaining, was his assistant-manager, and he and his wife had been guests on the *Sea Spray* for the week-end.

Nichols, silently approving Carter's name for his yacht, shook hands with the hearty-looking, balding man whose wife was much younger than himself and who seemed more emotionally upset by the occurrence than any of the others, although they all had a shocked tenseness about them as was only natural.

He also found himself reacting to a decided aura of sex appeal emanating from Mrs. Kelleher, for all her abstraction. Or was it sex hunger? Sex, anyway, even though her thoughts were well away somewhere else, and his interest in her quickened.

Stephen Carter drew his attention away from her by presenting Warren Har-ri-s, who was the chief accountant in the Gordoni organisation. He was a quiet, unassuming, precise individual of middle height, grey hair shining and as precise as himself . . . and his clothes, well-tailored with not a crease out of place. He was wearing a jacket while all the others were in sports shirts, and his face was one which did not express thoughts. A difficult man to get to know, was the inspector's verdict.

And then he was confronted by a very different proposition. This was a physically tough, dark-haired young man clad in very short khaki shorts, leather sandals and a Hawaiian silk shirt of spectacular design hanging loose over the shorts.

Nichols raised his eyes from this sartorial wonder and speculated about the intense, withdrawn expression that sat so incongruously on the young man's face. It was so much at odds with the rest of his appearance as to be almost ludicrous. What had he here? wondered Nichols.

"Peter Bowers, Inspector," Stephen Carter enlightened him. "He was the one who found Gordoni in the first instance."

"Nasty experience for you, Mr. Bowers," Nichols murmured. The young man shuddered.

"Ghastly, Inspector! Just ghastly!"

Nichols kept the sudden distaste he felt at the affectation in the fellow's voice out of his expression, but he couldn't help feeling surprised. It was so soft and high for such a husky chap. And—holy smoke! A chain bracelet on one wrist! Ladylike? he wondered. But he was hovering rather too closely and proprietorially around Susan Carter for that, surely? Shouldn't have thought he was her type, he mused on with mixed feelings, before sternly bringing his mind back to business as Stephen Carter spoke again.

"Signora Gordoni is our only other guest, Inspector. She is upstairs in her bedroom with our housekeeper looking after her. I've asked the doctor to see her after he's finished with—er—out there, if that's all right with you? She's dreadfully upset."

"Naturally. On holiday from Italy, weren't they?"

"Yes, and we—"

"We don't know that for certain, Steve," Kelleher put in quickly.

The inspector turned to him questioningly.

"Well, we didn't know he was coming, you see. It seemed a bit haywire for a V.I.P. to come, even for a holiday, without making a song and dance. They like the full treatment and let us know in plenty of time for us to turn it on. My guess is he was here on some business deal. Something he wanted to keep dark. We couldn't get a thing out of him, could we, Steve?"

Nichols glanced at Carter and came to the conclusion that the other man was not happy about the introduction of this

particular subject. Even Warren Harris had looked up sharply to frown at Kelleher.

"We didn't find out, at all events," Carter said abruptly. "And I don't suppose we shall know now."

"I see," murmured Nichols. "Well, suppose you tell me exactly what's been happening. I'm nowhere near being in the picture at all." He smiled his lop-sided smile almost apologetically and drew an answering one from Mrs. Carter, this time.

"Oh, do sit down, Inspector," she invited. "I'm sorry—I forgot to ask you if you'd like to smoke? Or perhaps a drink? Or are you one of those stern characters in crime novels who 'don't when on duty'?"

The inspector laughed, shaking his head.

"I won't have anything just yet, thank you," he replied, making himself comfortable in an easy chair after waiting for his hostess to seat herself first.

Joyce Carter beamed on him approvingly. She had thought the C.I.B. might be represented solely by tough, stolid, massive specimens like the ones out in the hall. This young man, though tough, was acting practically the same as any other guest. Thank goodness for small mercies! She sent an encouraging smile in her husband's direction. Poor Steve! He was looking dreadful. What a thing to happen! And what *were* they going to say to Marco's father and mother? Oh, dear!

She leaned closer to her husband to give him her silent support and set herself to listen carefully to the inspector who was asking him to . . . "Start at the beginning if you will, Mr. Carter."

"From the beginning? The beginning of what? That's the question," was Stephen Carter's reply. "All I can tell you is that we found The Old Salt in the water and my daughter and Peter, here, dived in to save her from drowning. I pulled Susan back on board, then Peter swam around to the stern to climb up on the rudder to reach a short ladder we have hanging there. That's when he found Gordoni—jammed around the propellor blades, drowned."

"The Old Salt?" queried the inspector.

"Our cat."

"Oh. The one I saw in the drive as I came in? Still wet?"

"A tabby," nodded Carter.

"Mmm. How did she get into the water, then?"

"Nobody seems to know that one, Inspector. Least of all me!" Stephen Carter waggled his head in bewilderment. "She hates water like poison."

Nichols frowned slightly.

"That's not much to go on, is it? We'll have to go back a bit further, I think. But first of all, why did you get on to Homicide, Mr. Carter, before anyone else?"

Carter shrugged.

"I just rang up and reported the accident but the person on the other end didn't like the circumstances evidently because he put me straight through to the C.I.B."

"Have you got any theories about these circumstances?"

"Theories?" Carter's nose wrinkled questioningly.

"Yes—er—whether it *was* an accident, or maybe—well—suicide, for instance?"

"Suicide!"

All the faces in the room expressed shock in one form or another.

"Nobody thought of it, eh?" asked Nichols.

"Good heavens, no, Inspector," Joyce Carter exclaimed emphatically. "And neither did Marco Gordoni, I'm sure of that. It was an accident. There could be no other explanation."

"Why are you so sure he wouldn't think of suicide, Mrs. Carter?"

"He wasn't the type, and he had no reason," she declared.

"Mmm." Nichols pursed his lips, then he flicked his crooked smile at her. "You've known him for some time?"

"Well—no. Only two days, but . . ."

The inspector's smile grew companionably.

"Woman's intuition?"

Her sudden, answering smile conceded the point to him.

"Sorry. It's just that I felt . . . well . . . suicide! Why?"

"All these things have to be thought of, Mrs. Carter." He turned back to her husband. "There'll have to be a post-mortem, I'm afraid. You realise that?"

"Oh! Yes, I suppose that'll be necessary. Lord, what a mess!" muttered Carter. "What shall I tell his—"

"Oh God, oh God, oh God!" Betty Kelleher broke in, sobbing as if her heart would break and startling them all. "I can't bear it! I can't—bear—it! I can't!"

Her husband's arm tightened around her shoulders.

"That'll do, old girl. That'll do," he mumbled, agitatedly.

The inspector's eyes rested curiously on Mrs. Kelleher's haggard face. A bruise along the line of her jaw caught his attention and he addressed his next remark to her husband.

"Your wife has had an accident, too?"

"Um? What d'you mean?"

"That bruise on her jaw."

"Oh!" Kelleher's eyes shifted uncomfortably. "Er—that was my fault, Inspector. I—I . . ."

Stephen came to his rescue, speaking softly so that Betty Kelleher couldn't hear.

"Hysterics, Inspector. She came aboard and saw Gordoni lying on the deck before we could get him below. Shock, of course . . . and John had to deal with it—a bit forcefully, unfortunately."

"I see. There seems to be a great deal I shall have to be told. Might we go back to the beginning of the week-end, for instance?"

Mrs. Kelleher's tears had stopped, he noticed, and he had the feeling that she was now listening intently even though her face was hidden against her husband's shoulder, and his own nerves flicked alive in an effort to pick up any other currents that might be in the air.

CHAPTER II

IT HAD all begun a few days earlier in the week. Stephen Carter and his wife were enjoying breakfast out on their patio this day, with Stephen full of appreciation for His View. The water in Sydney's beautiful harbour was having one of its bright green days and, across it, the white buildings of the city appeared slim and elegant even though overshadowed by the bridge which rose out of their midst to straddle the harbour with a foot on either shore. While his wife was busy filling his coffee cup for the third time, Stephen smiled on each of these points in turn as was his daily habit, but, this particular day, he was moved to words, as well.

"Something to be said for money, eh, hon?" he said suddenly.

She looked up, surprised.

"What brought that on?"

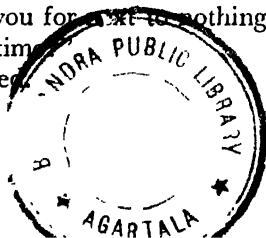
"Oh, the view, this house. It just struck me how much I'd miss 'em if I didn't have 'em."

"You've been drinking too much coffee, my lad," was the wifely reply. "It's giving you a liver. Next you'll be telling me that money can buy anything."

He chuckled.

"When I got you for next to nothing and me only a garage mechanic at the time."

His wife laughed.



"Darling, I'd have married you if you'd had millions!"

"Then I'd never have known if you married me for my money or myself alone. What an escape!"

"Wouldn't you?"

Their eyes met and he laughed.

"For an old married woman of forty-two, you've got no right to have that look in your eye. I've got a board meeting at eleven, remember."

"You horror!" she retorted. "Here—take your coffee and I hope your liver suffers accordingly."

He took the proffered cup meekly enough but an eyebrow cocked itself at her suggestively.

"By way of a sedative?"

She pretended to be shocked.

"Don't be disgusting!" Thrusting one of the morning papers at him she continued, "Read the financial pages if you can't behave. That should tame you."

Stephen grinned, thinking again how attractive his wife looked this morning with her blue-black hair shining in the sun and the mischief, which the years had failed to quench, in her deep blue eyes. Hard to realise that she was the mother of a grown-up daughter. Which reminded him . . .

"Where's Susan? Still in bed?"

"Swimming in the pool, dear, or swabbing down the decks on the yacht. At all events, I saw her going down the track to the harbour while I was dressing."

"Amazes me how she can stay out most of the night and then be first up in the morning."

"You did the same when you were her age, I seem to remember," she reminded him.

"I had you on my mind, my girl. All she's got is that—that painter."

Joyce Carter gave him the benefit of another attractive smile.

"I take it from that remark that you still don't like him very much?"

Her husband's only reply was a grunt.

"It's only a phase, dear," she reassured him. "At least, I

hope it is. She's going through a Picasso Period . . . I hope."

"That's twice you've said 'I hope.' "

"Well—he's not quite what I'd like for Susan when all's said," she admitted.

Her husband gave her an affectionate glance before he replied, "Get on with your mail and let Susan handle her own love affairs, sweetheart. She's no fool. Takes after me."

"O-o-oh!" his wife moaned as if in pain, earning another chuckle from Stephen.

"Anyway," he continued, "he's only got to give her one more painting like that thing he did for her birthday and he'll be out. I've never seen anything more like a dead cod in my life!"

"My dear, you have no soul. It's called *Moonlight on the Harbour*."

"If that's how he sees moonlight on the harbour then there's no hope for him!" snorted Stephen.

"Now, now, now! Don't give yourself indigestion over it. She'll come out of it in time."

"We hope!"

At that moment, a thin little woman in a neat cotton frock came out on to the patio through the open glass doors of the living-room. It was the housekeeper, Nancy Field, who ran the house and her husband, George, as unobtrusively and as neatly as she dressed.

To have a housekeeper in Australia at all placed Joyce Carter in a category of her own. Australians do not take kindly to being servants. But to have the housekeeper's husband to act as chauffeur, gardener and general handyman as well, put Mrs. Carter into the miracle class. It was, in fact, simply a mutually satisfactory arrangement. Stephen Carter and George Field had been fellow prisoners in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp and, when they came out, George's health was found to be permanently impaired. He and his wife were without an income, and were living in one room because of the scarcity of accommodation which occurred when building almost came to a standstill during World War II.

Immediately, Stephen had a small, modern flat built over his garage and offered it and a decent wage to the Fields if they would take over the household management between them. He also dangled the job of engineer on his motor-yacht in front of George knowing his weakness for engines. From then on there was never any doubt that the Carters and the Fields should become one unit.

The smile with which Nancy greeted Stephen Carter this morning reflected all this, although her words were commonplace enough.

"You're wanted on the telephone, Mr. Carter."

Stephen groaned.

"The office?"

"I don't think so. Sounded like a foreigner," Nancy replied.

Stephen hauled himself out of his chair reluctantly and went into the house.

Nancy Field turned to Joyce.

"Will Susan be wanting her breakfast soon, do you think?"

"You bring it out, Nancy, and I'll go down and call her up. We can't have you being disorganised all day waiting for her." Joyce put down her morning mail and rose to her feet.

"The usual, I suppose?" smiled the housekeeper.

Joyce shrugged smilingly.

"We never seem able to get her to eat something more substantial, do we?"

"Pawpaw's good for her, at any rate. I read the other day that a diet of pawpaw and bananas contained all the vitamins. Ten minutes, then," said the Oracle with a nod before disappearing towards the kitchen with the dirty dishes.

The other woman laughed lightly as she walked on across the lawn and down a few steps leading to the gravel track which wound through some low scrub to the harbour below. Dear Nancy! Such an authority on what was good for people.

She paused at the top of the track to lean over a rocky parapet and looked directly down on to the decks of a long, rakish motor-yacht anchored below. There the shapely figure of a girl in her early twenties clad in faded jeans and a striped cotton jumper swabbed away at the deck with a will. A

dignified tabby cat gave evidence of its disapproval of such an undertaking by shaking dampened paws with an exaggerated flip every time they came in contact with the wet boards.

Susan Carter's laughing voice drifted up to her mother as she held a one-sided conversation with this martinet.

"Puss—you're a bully! I will not stop swabbing the decks just because you don't like water. You just make the best of it or I won't take you ashore for breakfast, see?" She threw a bucket of water vigorously across the decks to stress her point.

Puss flicked her paws even more vigorously to stress hers, and Joyce Carter smiled as she watched and listened from above. Surely she was blessed with more than most? All the good things of life seemed to have come her way. A husband like Stephen, a daughter like Susan, the Fields, a lovely home, everything she wanted that money could buy as well . . . a deep gratitude arose within her. When she finally spoke, her voice was warm with it still.

"Susan—breakfast, dear."

The girl looked up from her task and waved. She was lovely in the sun-tanned, clear-cut way of those who lead a healthy outdoor life.

"Coming!" she called, smilingly.

"Bring The Old Salt with you. She must be starving."

"Okay. Be right with you."

Shaking her head smilingly at the Americanisms Young Australia affected these days, Joyce returned to the breakfast table to find her husband back again but now, she noticed with surprise, his favourite view was being well and truly frowned upon.

"Who was it, dear?" she asked.

"Marco Gordoni," he replied slowly.

"Mar . . .?" Her eyebrows lifted. "You mean . . .? Not the son and heir?"

"The son and heir," he nodded.

"But . . . where was he ringing from? Not Italy, surely?"

"No. He's here—in Sydney."

"Did you know he was coming, then?"

"No."

"Well, why is he here? And so quiet about it!"

Stephen shrugged.

"He *said* he has come out on a holiday. Got his wife with him, at all events. Came by ship. All the trimmings."

"Well then?"

"I don't like it all the same."

Joyce smiled.

"You don't look as if you do, but who's crossing bridges now? I thought I was the only one in this family allowed that privilege?"

Stephen gave her a quick smile that died as quickly.

"No. I don't think I am."

"As long as you haven't been 'cooking the books', what have you got to worry about?"

"That I wish I knew!" was the emphatic reply. "Coming out without letting me know until he's here—it makes me feel as if I *have* been cooking the books as you call it. But there's nothing wrong with the business as far as I know, therefore—what?"

"Is he going to stay with us?" Joyce sat up as the thought struck her.

"No. He's booked in at the Hotel Australia. Says he finds it easier to move around, and nobody gets hurt because he stays with one and not the other. Oh, he's got an answer ready for everything, but I've just got a feeling that all's not as he says it is. Anyway, I've asked them for the week-end."

"Oh," said Joyce, thoughtfully.

Her husband gave her a quick look.

"Now don't you make it an excuse to fill the house with people, do you hear? I know that look of yours. The last time I saw it we had twenty, at least, milling about the place. All the fish in the harbour headed straight out into the Pacific to get a bit of peace—and I want to go fishing this week-end! Do you hear me?"

Joyce, her plans well and truly laid by this time, replied with sweet reasonableness, "You can still go fishing, dear. We'll take them all out for picnics in the *Sea Spray*."

"All?"

"Well—Warren Harris hasn't been out with us for some time. It'd be a good opportunity to have him with some others. Heavy going by himself, poor man! And we'll ask John and Betty Kelleher . . ."

Stephen opened his mouth to protest but his wife cut in first.

"You can't leave your assistant manager and his wife out. Now be reasonable, dear."

"It's not John who gives me a pain so much as his wife," growled Stephen. "One of these days she'll succeed in seducing me and then you'll be satisfied!"

Joyce laughed.

"With an Italian about? You won't stand a chance."

"No man is safe from that woman," her husband replied. "Why John doesn't put her in chains, I don't know."

"Oh, darling, she's harmless." She paused. "I suppose we'd better ask Peter Bowers for Susan, too, or she'll think we're trying to plan her life."

Stephen groaned, but his eyes were twinkling again as he got up and bent over her.

"What a week-end I'm in for! If you ask anybody else, I'll shoot you, woman! But now I must get off to cook some more books. Do what you think best. You will anyway." He kissed her. "Bless you!"

Susan chose this moment to come running across the lawn with The Old Salt at her heels. She grinned fondly at her parents.

"You two making love again? Really! At nine o'clock in the morning, too. Aren't you ever going to get over it?"

"Hope not," was her father's imperturbable reply. "How's the *Sea Spray*? Soaked the decks well? Going to be another hot day," he warned her.

"Everything under control, Skipper. Shipshape and Bristol fashion."

"Okay. See you both tonight."

With a final wave of his hand, Stephen went off towards the drive where George Field would be waiting with the car.

"We'll have to see to the cabins later, Sue," Joyce said to her daughter as she flopped inelegantly into her father's vacated chair. "We're having guests for the week-end."

The Old Salt, as if on cue, scowled and headed kitchenwards having seen the futility of parading hopefully around the breakfast table when humans had other things on their minds.

"Anybody I know?" asked Susan.

"Marco Gordoni and his wife . . ."

"You mean—from the firm in Italy?"

Her mother nodded.

"Son and heir and—very handsome, I hear."

"Mmm! Pity he's bringing his wife in that case," Susan remarked, mischievously.

"You will be occupied with Peter Bowers, my girl," her mother replied with mock severity. "You leave handsome Italians to me."

"Is Peter coming?"

"You'd like to ask him, wouldn't you? And John and Betty Kelleher will be there—with Warren Harris . . ."

"Oh, lord! Cheerful thought!" Susan grimaced. "This is a bit sudden, isn't it?"

"Yes," her mother replied thoughtfully. "The Gordonis have just arrived out here. Nobody knew they were coming."

Susan looked across the table.

"Bit unusual for V.I.P's, isn't it? They usually make sure everybody knows they're coming so that the red carpet can be out from the moment they step off the plane."

"Ship."

"Oh, it's a holiday trip, is it?"

"We don't know yet."

"What's worrying you, then, my pet?" Susan continued. "Are you off building bridges again?"

Joyce Carter smiled ruefully.

"Don't you start that again. You and your father between you are giving me quite a complex."

"Well, I can't see anything in this sudden arrival to worry about, darling."

Her mother stood up and began gathering up the mail.

"No. I suppose I'm just being influenced by your father's attitude. Heavens! I hope Nancy and George haven't made any plans of their own for the week-end. We'll need them both."

"I shouldn't worry," Susan grinned. "George wouldn't miss a week-end on the yacht. Where are we going, by the way? And what time shall I tell Peter?"

"Saturday morning, I think. About eleven. I thought we'd go up Middle Harbour for a picnic lunch, call in at Manly for a swim, perhaps, then back to the house for a late dinner, then on to a night club. How does that appeal?"

"Sounds fine. Okay. I'll tell Peter to bring a dinner jacket. I—er—notice you don't ask if *we've* made plans of our own for the week-end?"

Her mother looked dismayed.

"Oh, darling! You haven't, have you?"

Susan laughed.

"No. Rest assured—I'll be here to rescue you from handsome Italians. What's his wife like, by the way? You haven't mentioned her."

"I don't know. Young, I suppose."

"Perhaps I'll have to rescue the Skipper as well, then. Good thing I'll be around, if you ask me."

Joyce Carter laughed.

"You sound so like your father at times it might as well be him sitting there!"

"Isn't it 'he', darling?" her daughter murmured. "And where's my breakfast? I thought you were always so anxious for me to eat something in the morning?"

"Wretch!" exclaimed Joyce. "Pity you're not young enough to spank still."

"Tck, tck! Corporal punishment, too. And I thought you were such a modern parent. How one can be mistaken!"

"Ah, what's the use!"

Her mother laughingly gave up and went indoors, nearly upsetting The Old Salt who was mincing out into the sunshine to attend to her after-breakfast toilet.

Susan greeted the cat affectionately.

"Glutton! Nobody cares whether I have any food or not but you get yours all right, I notice."

The Old Salt blinked up at her happily.

"You're a fat, bloated glutton!" Susan repeated fondly, lounging back in her chair so that the sun could play over her upturned face. A little later she sighed thoughtfully and continued her one-sided conversation. "And your life is just as uncomplicated as it can be, isn't it?"

The cat, blissfully working away with her rough, pink tongue on an already immaculate white front, made no reply.

Susan sighed again.

"Point being, Puss—shall I ask Peter for the week-end? I'm getting a bit tired of Picasso when it isn't backed up by anything else, I find."

Puss transferred her attention to an elegantly curved paw and still made no reply.

"Puss! Listen to me, you beastly creature!"

The cat's head came around at this, her eyes open wide, but, seeing nothing inviting in Susan's attitude, she returned to her cleaning.

"Viper!" her loving mistress continued, amiably. "You wait! I'll marry a man who hates cats just to spite you." Another sigh. "That is—if I ever meet a man who will be *the* one . . . and *I'll* know it—and *he'll* know it and . . . Oh, if ever!"

"Br-r-oaw!" The Old Salt deigned to answer at last.

"Ah, nuts to you!" Susan laughed herself out of her wistful mood and, was on the point of going into the house to see what had become of her breakfast when Nancy Field appeared with it on a tray.

"'Morning, Nancy," said Susan.

"Good morning. Black coffee and pawpaw as usual," was the disapproving reply.

"You can't organise me by pulling that long face, Nancy. Pawpaw is good for me." Susan's spoon dug enthusiastically into the golden flesh of the fruit which had been liberally sprinkled with sugar and lemon juice, just as she liked it.

The conversation appeared to be a daily routine between them for they continued on in the same easy, friendly manner to less controversial subjects.

"Seems we're going to have quite a social week-end, Nancy."

"Must do our best to make a good impression on the boss's son. Pity we didn't get notice earlier. However, we'll do our best."

"Your best should rock anyone, and if he gets better coffee than this in Italy, I must go there." She took a deep gulp of the steaming brew and sighed blissfully. "The man I marry must be able to make good coffee."

Nancy laughed.

"Oho, you don't want much! You'll have to make it for *him*, my girl."

Susan screwed up her nose with distaste.

"Why does marriage entail having to do housework? I shall loathe it!"

"You'll have to like it, let me tell you."

The housekeeper laughed again then went back into the house carrying a tray filled with used dishes.

Susan looked down at The Old Salt.

"Did you hear that? Housework! That's done it. I won't get married at all. Still—I'd better ask Peter for the week-end, I suppose, or he'll imagine the worst and then we'll have a fine old scene. Too late to concentrate on anyone else, anyhow. But after it's over I mustn't dodge the issue any longer, eh, Puss?"

"Br-r-r!"

"Oh, you! You just wait until I find a man who dislikes cats. I'll marry him straight away and I'll even do housework to put your nose out of joint."

Susan sipped her coffee luxuriously and Puss cleaned on, neither of them unduly disturbed by such black predictions.

CHAPTER III

THE OLD SALT was still working on her shirt front when the week-end guests arrived on the following Saturday morning. She had just taken up one of her favourite positions in the sun in the middle of the drive when John Kelleher swerved his car into it. Only a swift leap under a nearby hibiscus bush saved her from sudden extinction and her eyes were not kind as they glared back at the car as it drew up to the front door to deposit John, his wife, Betty, and a very handsome young man on the step. This young man, black-haired and olive-skinned, turned to assist a tiny but attractive young woman out of the car and, almost immediately, Stephen and Joyce Carter with Susan beside them came out to welcome their guests.

"Hello, Betty. John. Nice to see you."

"Hello, ~~there~~," replied John Kelleher, waving a hand in the direction of his two passengers. "I picked 'em up at the 'Australia' as per instructions and here we are—all ready for a life on the ocean wave."

Joyce Carter wondered for a moment why John always had to be so hearty and then Stephen was introducing Marco Gordoni and his wife.

"I'm so glad you could spare the time to visit us," she smiled. Her hand was kissed in the Continental manner and she was given the benefit of a deep glow of admiration from

two black eyes before she could shake the small outstretched hand of Tina Gordoni. Mmm, Joyce thought to herself, quite a man for the ladies! She felt as if she had been given a warm bath. "So glad," she murmured rather dazedly.

"It is so kind of you to ask us, Signora," Tina's soft voice with its delightful accent brought her back to her duties. "You have such a very beautiful home here, I think."

"Most gracious, indeed, Signora," Marco bowed gracefully to emphasise his wife's remarks. "But may we not be Marco and Tina with you? Is it not the Australian custom between friends?" Then his eyes glowed even brighter as they passed on from Joyce to her daughter, Susan. "But—this is surely not *your* daughter? You cannot have one so grown-up? It is not possible!"

"You're an expert flatterer, Marco," Joyce laughed. "Yes, this is our daughter Susan. Signor and Signora Gordoni, Susan."

"How do you do?"

Susan blinked as her hand, too, was kissed before she turned to exchange smiles with Tina. "Hello."

"Hello—Susan? Is that how you say it? I am Tina—and I am envious of your beautiful red hair already," concluded the Italian girl laughingly.

"She gets it from me, poor kid," Stephen put in. "But there's not a thing you could possibly envy anyone for, believe me!" And he bowed with a flourish that sent his wife's eyebrows soaring.

"You are most kind, Signor Car-tair."

"Stephen?" he suggested.

Tina Gordoni laughed.

"Ah, Stee-phen, you are, as we say, *simpatico*, I think?" She turned to her husband for confirmation. "Are they not *simpatico*, *caro*? Do you not feel it?"

"Of course! Of course!" Marco agreed emphatically, still devouring Susan with his eyes. "Delightful!"

"Great!" John Kelleher joined in with a laugh that could be heard across the harbour. "Then let's get aboard the lugger, eh? What d'you say?"

Joyce Carter quickly took the controls. She wasn't going to be told her business by any John Kelleher.

"I'll just show you to your rooms and then you can come down when you're ready. We're still waiting for Warren Harris and Susan's friend, Peter Bowers, so there's no rush. We thought we'd have a picnic lunch on board and show you some of the sights, with perhaps a swim or two, if that suits everybody?"

"It sounds wonderful," Tina replied. "But Marco and I must change into something a little more suitable, please, then we shall be prepared for anything. Is that how you say it?"

"Of course. We'll be in the living-room when you are ready." Joyce turned to Susan. "Find George, will you, darling, and ask him to bring the cases in out of the car and then garage it?"

"Okay. See you all later."

With a wave of the hand, Susan went off in search of George.

"Charming!" murmured Marco Gordoni, looking after her.

Joyce, happening to look at Betty Kelleher, was shocked at the unpleasant glint in her eyes as they rested on Gordoni's back. She had never liked Betty very much, thinking her rather an empty vessel. Now she recalled a remark Stephen had made about her earlier in the week—something about the woman seducing him. She had taken it as one of his jokes, but now . . .? Mmm. Perhaps there was something a bit predatory there, after all. Well, Betty'd be asking for trouble if she started anything with an Italian while his wife was about. Small and charming Tina might be, but the fine jaw was firm and the eyes held a smoulder that might mean flames if disturbed. Goodness, I hope they all behave themselves while they're with us, anyway, she thought, and she led the little cavalcade upstairs to their rooms with one of her private bridges being built with every step.

Susan and George soon followed with the luggage, and eventually, mother, father and daughter were able to gather in the living-room to await their guests' convenience.

"We're both nicely catered for, aren't we?" grinned Stephen

to his wife as he collapsed into a chair. "Not often we get one each."

"You're disgusting!" his wife twinkled back at him. "And if I catch you oozing charm over Tina's hand again, my boy, there'll be a divorce in the house."

"One thing—Daddy won't have to worry about you and Marco with me about," Susan broke in airily.

Remembering her former impressions of Tina Gordoni, Joyce Carter sat up suddenly.

"If you mean what I think you mean, my girl, you be careful what you're about there."

Stephen chuckled quietly.

"Don't worry, hon. Age before beauty, remember."

Father and daughter laughed delightedly at the explosion which followed.

The situation was saved by the entrance of George Field, a tall, quiet man who rarely smiled and who called his employer Steve when they were alone together and nothing at all when others were present just to show his independence. He came into the room to say that the yacht was ready, food and drink on board, and Nancy and he would be standing by in the galley and engine-room respectively.

"Thanks, George," said Stephen, still chuckling. "Won't be long. Just waiting for them all to get settled in. Plenty of bait about in case we have a chance to toss over a line?"

"You bet. The house is locked up at the back. You only have to lock the front door when you come out."

"Right. Help yourself to a beer on board while you're waiting."

"Thanks. Okay, then."

With a nod to Joyce, George went off.

A chugging sound from the front of the house brought Susan's head up.

"Here's Peter," she said, and ran out to bring him in.

"Hope that bomb doesn't blow up while it's in our drive," Stephen remarked.

"Serve you right if it did!" his wife snorted. "I'd like to set one off under *you* sometimes. Age before beauty, indeed!"

Her husband laughed outright.

"Darling, you're so lovely when you get mad, I can't resist teasing you."

Slightly mollified, Joyce nevertheless replied sharply, "You can't get around *me* with compliments."

"That's not a compliment, hon. It's true—and you know it, or you wouldn't get mad, you hussy." His eyes twinkled into hers, daring her to retaliate.

"Oh, no! You don't catch me a second time, my lad. But you listen to me," she went on, suddenly serious. "Don't let Susan play games with that Italian. I don't want any complications this week-end."

"Susan?" Stephen was incredulous. "Nonsense! She was only pulling your leg."

"Perhaps. But I wasn't thinking about Susan so much as . . ."

"Who?" he prompted with a grin as his wife paused to frown.

Joyce was opening her mouth to reply when Susan ushered in a neatly dressed, grey-haired man with a humourless air, and a tough-looking, dark-haired young man whose short shorts riveted all eyes.

"I found Mr. Harris on the doorstep, Mother," said Susan.

Joyce Carter dragged her eyes away from those shorts—for a moment she had feared Peter had forgotten them altogether—and rose smilingly to her feet.

"So glad you could both come," she said. "Susan—will you take Peter up? Stephen . . .?"

"Sure. Come with me, Harris. All set for a day on the yacht?" he was asking as he piloted Warren Harris upstairs.

As their voices died away, Joyce returned to her private bridge-building. By the time her husband returned alone she was looking very thoughtful indeed.

"What's up, hon?" he asked.

"Have you heard yet why the Gordonis have come out here?"

"Not a word. He's dropped in at the works two or three times and had a chat with this one and that—mostly about

how things are going out here. Other than that"—Stephen shrugged—"no mention. Don't say anything in front of the others, hon. I don't want them to get the idea that I'm getting fanciful in my old age."

"Just as you like," Joyce murmured, still thoughtfully. Then—"Betty met them before?"

"Mmm? As a matter of fact, she has. When she and John went to Italy, remember?"

"Oh!"

"Why 'Oh!' like that?"

"Just wondered."

He looked at her sharply.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing," she replied. "Nothing at all."

"Lord, women!" he moaned. "As if I haven't got enough to worry me without you making sinister suggestions about Betty!"

"I didn't make sinister suggestions!" his wife retorted indignantly. "Whatever next? And what have you got to worry about? You're carrying on about a simple visit as if you were scared of something. Let's keep on an even keel, for goodness sake!"

"Even keel, she says!" snorted her husband. "I tell you—"

But whatever he had been about to tell her would have to wait for, at that moment, John and Betty Kelleher, bearing colourful swimming hold-alls, came into the room. They were joined soon after by Warren Harris carrying a prosaic little suitcase which evidently held his swim shorts and which drew a contemptuous glance from John Kelleher. Of all the old maids, the glance seemed to shout to the world. Joyce was grateful when the sudden and noisy arrival of the Gordons with Susan and Peter prevented John from making audible comments. She wondered if Harris knew what John thought of him. But who ever knew what Harris knew or didn't know? He'd have made a good model for the Sphinx, she decided as she led the way across the lawn and down to the yacht, hoping there would be no unpleasantness between them during the week-end. Where did this uneasy feeling come from, anyway?

Was Stephen's fussing catching? Oh, rubbish! What could possibly happen?

With a shrugging laugh at her preoccupation, Joyce threw off all such thoughts and set herself to attend to her hostess duties.

CHAPTER IV

IT TOOK some manœuvring to get the fifty feet of *Sea Spray* out of Thorntree Bay. In fact, it took the combined efforts of George Field in the engine-room, Stephen at the wheel, John and Peter to crank in the anchor, and Susan, assisted enthusiastically by Marco Gordoni, to cast off fore and aft, but eventually the yacht swung slowly and neatly about and then nosed her way out to join the main stream of the harbour traffic. She looked wonderful in the clear sunlight, sleek and powerful, and Stephen's heart swelled with the joy of ownership as he swung the wheel over to port to set her on her course towards Bradley's Head.

This done, he could relax a little and devote some time to his guests, particularly as his wife had gone below to help Nancy in the galley, and Susan and Peter were rigging an awning over the after-deck so that lunch might be eaten there in comfort.

"Come into the wheelhouse and have a drink," he called to the others who were standing at various vantage points on the fore-deck to watch the passing scene.

They needed no second call and were soon gathered around the cocktail cabinet set into the panelling above the built-in seats and table which furnished the wheelhouse.

"Sit down and relax while I concentrate on the Saturday traffic," Stephen invited, without turning away from the wheel. The traffic was thick as usual. "Look after them John, will you?"

"Too right!" John replied heartily, springing into action. "My favourite indoor sport—mixing drinks. Name your poison!"

When he had served them all with a barman's professional flourish, he turned to Stephen. "And what's for the Skipper?"

"Lager for me at this time of day, thanks."

"To hear is to obey!"

Betty Kelleher barely concealed an impatient twitch of her shoulders. Sometimes her husband's 'funniness' was almost more than she could bear.

"This is a beautiful boat, Stee-phen." Tina wriggled herself into a comfortable corner of the well-cushioned seat.

"Like her?" Stephen smiled, still without turning his head. Dozens of sailing yachts had begun to line up around him in readiness for the Saturday races and needed watching. "She could tell some tall yarns, I'll bet," he continued. "She was used to pick up ditched airmen during the war, I believe."

"Business must be good in Australia," laughed Marco. "I think I must—emigrate, is it?"

"No need for you to envy me, I should say," Stephen threw back at him over his shoulder with a chuckle.

"*That* is the understatement of the year! Everything falls into Marco's lap like over-ripe plums."

Stephen's smile faded as he lifted his head in a listening attitude. Betty Kelleher's voice had quite an edge of bitterness to it. What did she mean—'over-ripe plums'? Queer expression. And come to think of it, she hadn't had much to say for herself until now. He opened his mouth to say as much when Tina's soft laugh floated out behind him.

"How well you know him, Signora Kelleher," was all she said, but, again, Stephen could sense an edge to a voice.

However, John's booming laugh dissipated any atmosphere that might have built up from this and, for once, Stephen was glad to hear it.

"Don't we all know Marco could have anything he wants!" chortled John. "He's only got to ask Papa Gordoni—and there you are—Bob's your uncle!"

"Ah, that is where you are quite wrong," Marco was quick

to reply with an equally quick scowl. "My father makes me take a wage just like all his employees. He treats me like a child. He will be sorry he—"

"Oh, Marco—look!" Tina broke in, pointing out of the window while her other hand gripped her husband's with unnecessary force.

His eyes flickered across to hers and he immediately stood up and became interested in the view outside.

At that moment, Susan and Peter, with The Old Salt in attendance, came in out of the sun and the conversation became general until someone happened to mention that Peter was an artist.

"Is that so?" asked Marco with interest. "I, too, have painted a little. What school do you favour, may I ask?"

"I'm modelling my work on Picasso," replied Peter, rather patronisingly. "Drink, Sue?"

But Gordoni did not like to be passed over as if he were less than no account and, eyes glittering with malice, he said with a slight bow of admiration to Susan, "I wonder you have not painted the beautiful Susan. The colouring is exquisite. A perfect Aurora, I think."

Peter looked round from the cocktail cabinet with pained disgust.

"Aurora? Good God! And I suppose you'd have me pose her lying on a couch, nude?"

Marco laughed.

"No. Rising out of the waves, my friend, as Aurora should, surely?"

"That's how you'd do her, I suppose?"

The Italian laughed suggestively into Peter's scowling face.

"I am sure she would look beautiful so—but . . ." he shrugged. "I do not think my wife would allow it. Eh, Tina?"

"If I thought you were a genius, Marco, I would bear with it for art's sake. But I am quite safe, no? And so are you, Susan. He is a dreadful artist, so I shall not allow him to disfigure you."

"Disfigure is right!" Peter sneered. "Aurora rising out of

the waves! Preserve me! But with all those antiquated Old Masters hanging around you all your life—well, it's only natural, I suppose."

He was too incensed to see Susan's warning glances so she said sharply, "And how would you paint me—if it ever came to that?"

"What?" The wrathful young man dragged his glare away from Gordon's grinning face. "Oh, I've done you already," he said briefly, turning back to mixing drinks.

Susan's mouth flew open with surprise.

"You have? Then why haven't I seen it? Why the dead secret?"

Peter was unbending to answer her questions when Marco's voice stiffened him up again.

"He has done you in the Picasso style, one imagines, Susan."

"What of it?" snapped Peter.

By now Stephen's sympathies were with him which was quite unusual but Marco's idea of wit and humour when it involved Susan was getting under his own skin as well.

"Ah, yes!" Marco was continuing. "And the picture begins to take form, no? An eye in one corner of the canvas, an ear in another, and an arm in still another, is it not so? Picasso—he believes in disintegration. This is well known."

Peter's mouth tightened.

"Is that what you call it? I prefer to call it genius."

Marco shrugged pityingly.

"It is considered *avant garde*, of course, in these uncivilised times to admire the grotesque but—artistically—?" He shrugged again. "I do not express myself very well, perhaps, but—"

"You express yourself devastatingly, *caro*," his wife interrupted. "But the young man is becoming annoyed with you. You should not tease him so."

Marco raised his glass to her with exaggerated politeness.

"I am corrected," he said.

Stephen tried not to be too quick coming in with, "Everybody got a drink? Betty? You're not saying much. Everything all right?"

"I haven't been able to get a word in edgeways—yet. But my turn will come, don't worry."

Involuntarily, he turned his head to look at her. Although her tone was light, that edge was still there . . . and her eyes were fixed thoughtfully on Gordoni—and Gordoni was not happy under their regard, he noticed. His glance went quickly towards John. He was busy at the cocktail cabinet and appeared oblivious, thank goodness! What was Betty up to, for heaven's sake? And Gordoni? Were they out to wreck the week-end before it had started? And there was Tina lying back against the cushions with her eyes apparently closed but he caught a glint through the black lashes that told him that she was *not* so oblivious. Phew! Getting a bit warmish! And then it warmed up still further as Gordoni's voice re-directed itself to where Warren Harris was sitting staring out across the harbour and who had said not one word since the cruise had begun.

"You, also, do not say a great deal, Signor Harris. Is it that you think a great deal instead?"

Stephen sighed impatiently. Now what? What's he getting at Harris for? That insinuating note in his voice, as if he knew something sticky in everybody's life.

"That is correct." Harris's reply was merely conversational, however, as he devoted himself to caressing The Old Salt until she writhed with ecstasy.

"Ah!" Gordoni went on. "About—finance, perhaps?"

"Perhaps."

"One hopes your thoughts will prove—profitable. Do you know, Stee-phen, Signor Harris and I have discovered a mutual acquaintance—Signor Reeve, the stockbroker. Could anything be more agreeable and—er—lucrative, we hope, do we not, Signor Harris?"

Stephen glanced around with a smile, thinking to preserve the peace by encouraging this new conversation. When he noticed that Harris was glaring with cold fury at Gordoni who was grinning back at him with a great deal of enjoyment, he closed his mouth abruptly and turned back to concentrating on the wheel feeling more like yanking Gordoni up by the

seat of his shorts and tossing him overboard, silly young smart aleck! What had got into everybody today? Bad enough to have to miss a week-end's fishing without having to put up with temperament right, left and centre as well. If they kept this up he really would knock a few heads together pretty soon.

Luckily for the heads, he had to give his full attention to his steering as Middle Head loomed its craggy heights dead ahead, and, in the manipulating of *Sea Spray* around it and across the Sound where the Pacific swell came rolling in to starboard, and bringing her to anchor in a rocky bay off the Manly Pool, all thoughts of possible emotional undercurrents were swept from his mind.

Once the boat was anchored, the call to luncheon soon had the whole party gathered on the after-deck under the awning, to be mellowed by the good food and wine which Joyce and Nancy had provided.

By the time the meal was nearing its end, Stephen was glad to hear that the edges seemed to have disappeared from voices. Indeed, he began to wonder if he might not have been fanciful earlier. Why—even Peter Bowers had loosened up enough to smile approvingly once or twice.

Joyce, also noticing this phenomenon, wondered why this young man couldn't be natural and enjoy things all the time without being so irritatingly lofty. She really couldn't place him at all. He professed to be arty, yet he looked so earthy and athletic. Sheer chemistry must have been responsible for Susan getting together with him in the first place. She smiled to herself as she looked down the table to where Marco Gordoni was entertaining the ladies around him. Now there was a complete chemical factory if you liked! Her eyes moved along the table to encounter her husband's quizzical eyebrows quirking themselves at her. She made a face at him to assure him that she preferred Italians to himself just in case he had any doubts and went on with her lunch.

After luncheon, the suggestion of a short nap met with such approval that everyone had gone to their cabins before Nancy Field had managed to clear the tables, and quiet reigned over

the yacht until Stephen went around to knock them up for a swim.

When they had all gathered on the deck in their bathing suits, he gave the Italians his usual lecture on the dangers of swimming in the open harbour because of the sharks, then led them ashore over a headland walk to the harbour beach where a pool nearly half a mile long had been enclosed by a net stretching across from rocky headland to the jetty where the Manly ferries came in from Circular Quay.

As was usual during week-ends, the pool and the beach were crowded. Brightly dressed Manlyites went about in beachwear and sundresses to do their Saturday shopping in the Corso, the short street which connected harbour beach with ocean surfing beach. Tall white buildings glistened in the sun. Pine trees, palm trees and street plantations gave this suburb of Sydney such a cosmopolitan air that the Gordons exclaimed at its likeness to the Lido at Venice which also had a Corso linking an inner and an outer waterfront but which had not such lovely golden sands, they asserted with some envy.

This drew a burst of badinage from Stephen and his wife to which Marco and Tina replied with enthusiasm and under cover of this Susan dawdled so that she and Peter lagged some distance behind the others.

"Peter," she said at last, "did you have to be so rude before lunch?"

"Rude?" Peter raised his eyebrows in amazement. "I wasn't rude."

"Oh, no? Marco Gordoni is Daddy's guest. The least we can do, even if we don't share his opinions about things—"

"Share his opinions? Ye gods and little fishes! Are you being funny?"

"Certainly not! All I want you to do is to be reasonably polite during this week-end . . . if it isn't too much to ask."

He gave her a hostile glance.

"It's only this Marco you're worried about, I notice. Don't think I haven't seen him ogling at you and pawing you at the least opportunity. And you letting him do it! Have you fallen for him, by any chance?"

"Don't be silly! I've only just met him. And don't twist the conversation. Politeness is the subject, remember?"

"Surely you don't expect me to agree with every moron who thinks photographic art is the highest form? Prostitute my deepest convictions? My dear girl . . ."

"Oh, don't go on!" Susan sighed. "I've heard it all before—and you know something? I don't think *you* believe what you're saying either."

Peter was incredulous.

"*What* did you say?"

"Never mind. Skip it!" she relented. "Just don't be insulting if he baits you again, and that's all it was, you know—baiting. Anyone who wasn't an absolute idiot about arty-crafty modern stuff could have seen that with half an eye."

Bewildered, he continued to stare down at her.

"What's got into you? I thought you went for Picasso, too?"

"That's as may be," she replied.

"You *have* fallen for that Wop!" he fumed. "That smarmy, slimy Wop!"

"Oh, shut up!" she snapped, and ran on ahead.

He stopped in his tracks, unable to credit his ears. Then he picked up the largest stone he could find, hurled it with fury into the water and went for a long walk with the sulks.

Thus it happened that Susan, when sunbathing amongst the rocks beside the pool later, did it alone while the rest of the party remained in the pool. She had found a weather-worn indentation which took feminine curves comfortably and she was soon half-asleep, going over in her mind the conversation she had just had with Peter and wishing she had said nothing after all, least of all losing her temper about it. What was the use? He always put the wrong construction on things, anyway. He was probably at the stage right now when he was calling her Marco's mistress in his own mind. Lord! She hoped she had more sense than that. All Italians had a habit of—well, trying it on, she supposed. Part of the national temperament. Not to be taken seriously.

It was at that very moment that she heard Marco's voice close at hand, and her eyes flicked wide as she heard him say, "You little fool! What were you trying to do this morning with your silly remark about—over-ripe plums, was it not? Would you like to tell my wife to her face that we were lovers in Italy? Is that what you want?"

Susan sat up with a jerk. What—?

"And do you think you're going to ignore me as you have been doing ever since you arrived?" a woman's angry voice replied.

Heavens! Betty Kelleher!

Hastily, Susan rolled over, intent on getting away unseen as soon as possible. A slight splash on the opposite side of the rocks and the sound of carefully controlled breathing held her still, however. She flattened herself down again amongst the rocks waiting for whoever it was to swim off. But the breathing continued. Someone needed air badly yet was taking it so cautiously that Susan was soon sure that the person was staying there to listen. Who could be so disgusting? she wondered. Yet what other explanation could there be? At all events, she was being forced into the same position herself and she tried to shut her ears to the voices yet, despite herself, curiosity held them wide open to catch Gordoni's reply.

"Ai-ee!" he was continuing exasperatedly. "Here it is not like in Italy. You must realise this. There is my wife. Your husband. We must be discreet."

"Discreet! You mean you've stopped loving me," Betty accused him bitterly. "Perhaps you prefer the younger charms of Susan Carter?"

Susan started.

There was a sigh from Marco at this.

"Of course not," he said. "How could that be when we have shared so many delightful moments?" His voice dropped into a more intimate level.

Realised he's using the wrong tactics, thought Susan involuntarily.

"And we may yet share so much more—if you will not draw attentions to us, *mi amore*," he went on, caressingly. "How

can you say I do not love you? When I have you in my arms—like this—you know it, do you not?"

Water swirled as two bodies came together urgently and there was a long silence.

"Oh, darling, darling! Again!" Betty breathed at last. "Kiss me again! Kiss me, Marco!"

Silence again.

Susan felt her cheeks burn, and the breathing on the other side of the rocks seemed to her to stop altogether for a moment.

Then—

"Tonight, Marco. Tonight!" Betty was pleading.

"But it will be so difficult, Betta. We are guests in a strange house . . ."

"Please! Please!"

"Do you think I do not want . . .? Ah, well, leave it to me. I will try to arrange it somehow. But now—we must return to the others before they notice we are not with them . . . and you will not say silly things again, eh?"

There was a long pause during which Susan heard a deep breath and a quick swirl in the water where the listener had been . . . then silence. He must have dived, she decided at last.

The sound of the other two swimming away brought a sigh of relief to her lips. If any of them had happened to see her—! How awful!

After a few moments, she felt it might be safe to lean cautiously around one of the rocks and see if she could recognise the listener.

She could see Gordoni's head amongst the throng of swimmers, with Betty's now some distance away. They were both making towards the float where her mother and father were lying. Peter was nowhere to be seen. Still sulking, she supposed. Then she saw Tina draw herself up on to the float. Could she have swum the distance underwater, Susan wondered. She was a good swimmer but—could she? But wait! Tina had just been joined by John Kelleher. Much more likely! And there was the grey head of Warren Harris. So it could have been any one of them—or even a

perfect stranger. Susan gave a wriggle of distaste and lowered her head again. At least she could see to it that nobody found out that they had been overheard by their host's daughter.

She waited out of sight for a while until she saw Peter coming along the beach from the Corso bearing peace offerings in the shape of ice-cream cones, then she slipped into the water and swam unobtrusively towards him.

CHAPTER V

THAT EVENING, after dinner on the patio, the Carters took their house-party into the city by car to introduce them to Romano's night club.

It could hardly have been called a successful evening, Romano's excellent hospitality notwithstanding, and Joyce Carter watched it disintegrate with dismay. Peter, finding Susan unable to keep her eyes away from Marco and Betty Kelleher, placed the wrong construction upon her interest and spent his time glaring from one to the other. Joyce could have shaken him as she danced around in his arms knowing him to be completely oblivious of her presence there.

She soon felt like shaking every one of the party in turn, if it came to that. There was Susan flirting outrageously with Marco solely because of Peter's obvious jealousy presumably. And, of course, Marco was playing up to her magnificently. He needed little encouragement at the best of times, judged Mrs. Carter grimly, as she caught sight of Betty Kelleher watching him like a cobra ready to strike. Oh, delightful! And Tina Gordoni, too—ogling Stephen while pretending not to notice her husband's antics with Susan. Oh, dear! And John Kelleher drinking himself steadily into that state of stupidity that was so loathesome in him. Ugh! An ache started to make itself felt over Joyce Carter's eyes and what she wanted most was a good strong cup of tea. Then she knew it was time to call a halt. Goodness! Where was Warren Harris? That man—so quiet and inconspicuous—she was

always forgetting about him. Where . . .? Oh, there he was. Almost lost behind John's bulk—just sitting there staring thoughtfully into his whisky. Or was *he* half-soaked as well? Never knew with him. Oh, my head!

As quietly and as quickly as possible after this urgent warning, she gathered her guests together and took them home on the pretext of having prepared a heavy day for them on the morrow.

Her husband raised his eyebrows but said nothing. It suited him. It was already after midnight, anyway. But it wasn't like Joyce to make the first move towards home. She'd dance till dawn as a rule if he wasn't firm. He wondered why she was keen to call it off so early.

She soon informed him of her reasons while they were preparing for bed later.

"That was a horror if ever I saw one, Stephen. Whatever went wrong? There was an atmosphere so thick you could have cut it with a knife. And, of course, that Peter Bowers wasn't exactly a help. He gave me the feeling that I was dancing with a volcano getting ready to explode. But . . . there was something else as well. Some undercurrent." She wrinkled her brows to puzzle it out. "Did you notice it?"

No reply.

She looked over to where Stephen was standing in his pyjamas looking through the slats of the venetian blinds, performing his nightly ritual of admiring His View by Moonlight.

"Stephen—are you with me?" she asked.

"Just as you say, dear."

Joyce's eyes snapped indignantly, but something in his attitude aroused her curiosity and she moved over to stand beside him.

"What are you look— Oh!" she exclaimed as she peered out across the moonlit lawns towards the brush shelter they had made on the point for shade.

Stephen turned to look down at her.

"Serve you right, Stickybeak," he said lightly. "Your harmless friend, Betty!" Then he frowned. "Good job John's a heavy sleeper, if you ask me."

Joyce was outraged.

"But—in my house, Stephen! While she's a guest!"

"Don't go off the deep end, hon. He's only kissing her."

"Only? Do you suppose it's going to stop there? With an Italian?"

Her husband's mouth twitched.

"What do you know about Italians, may I ask?"

She looked at him quickly.

"What? Why, nothing, only . . ."

"Only it's a good job you haven't been to Italy, or I'd be getting jealous."

"Oh!" Her hand flew up to her mouth. "Italy! Do you suppose they've been . . .?"

"I suppose they are carrying on from where they left off last year. Now—come away from the window. If they see our shadows on the blind . . ."

"It's not us they have to worry about," she retorted. "Is Tina a heavy sleeper, too?"

"Lord! You don't expect me to know that, do you?" He gave her a well-aimed slap. "Get into bed and forget it."

"But, Stephen—"

"It's none of our business. Now, is it? Or would you like me to go down and read them the Ten Commandments?"

"I find their behaviour absolutely—"

Her husband stooped suddenly and kissed her, putting his whole heart into it.

"You find their behaviour what, sweetheart?" he asked much later.

"You are disgusting! How much did you have to drink at Romano's?"

"Not so much that I can't see what a gorgeous creature you are when you get up on your high horse. Come off it and get into bed, woman. At least you don't have to worry about Betty seducing me while there's an Italian on the scene."

He reached out a masterful hand and switched off the lights.

The next morning, after a comfortable breakfast in bed with his wife, Stephen went down to check the *Sea Spray*

before anybody else was about except for the Fields—Nancy doing the breakfasts and George already in his beloved engine-room.

“ ‘Morning, George.”

“ ‘Morning, Steve. Another fine day.”

“Yes. Glass is holding steady, too. Hah! This is the life, eh? They say money doesn’t buy everything, but it makes what you have to do without easier to bear.”

George gave him a narrow glance, then, apropos of nothing, said, “Heard anything about a new type of engine lately?”

Stephen, who had been gazing fondly down into the yacht’s engines, looked up, surprised.

“There was something about a two-stroke air-cooled in the papers the other day if that’s what you mean. And the fuel-cell thing, but nobody’s got that perfected yet. Why—do you want to replace these engines?”

“No. They’re going like birds. But I happen to hear a thing or two down here. People forget about the hatch over there.”

Stephen followed the other’s glance to the open hatchway which led to the after-deck.

“I don’t see what you’re getting at, George.”

George’s eyes rested sombrely on his friend’s smiling face for a moment.

“Thought you didn’t know anything about it,” he grunted. “*Macchina*,” he went on, gently tapping the shining machinery beside him with a spanner. “That’s I-tie for engine, isn’t it?”

Stephen’s smile died away.

“That’s right. What about it?”

“Remember old Angelo we had behind the bamboo up in Malaya? I learnt a bit of the lingo from him if you’ll remember. Not much, but enough to find out that Gordoni’s got a plan of the fuel-cell right here in Australia with him—perfected.”

“Rot!”

“Fact. Going to sell it—but *not* to Gordoni’s.”

“*What?*”

Stephen and George looked at each other for a long moment.

George nodded.

"Cutting the ground from under the Old Man. Bit of spite there for some reason, I guess."

Stephen blinked, unable to take in the implications of George's information.

"Oh, I don't believe it. I mean—where would he get a plan like that, and why keep it to himself? Is your Italian up to it, George? You're sure you haven't got it all wrong?"

"His wife was trying to get him to change his mind. Guest in your house, nice people, why won't he do the decent—all that. My Italian was up to it. Don't ask me where he got the plan or why he's aiming to ruin Gordoni's or—"

"Ruin Gordoni's?" Stephen gasped incredulously. "You're crazy, George!"

"Am I?" George's face remained as expressionless as ever, his voice calm and slow, which made Stephen pull up his rioting thoughts and concentrate on that one word 'ruin'.

"Ruin . . . Gordoni's?" he repeated.

"That's what it would mean, wouldn't it? Revolutionise the whole car industry. Oil companies'd suffer. Only a fraction of the oil needed in a car with a fuel-cell . . ."

At last, Stephen, feeling as if a train had hit him, focused his eyes on George's in full comprehension.

"Good God! I'll have a word with him as soon as I can. He can't realise . . ."

"He wouldn't listen to his wife," George reminded him.

"He'll listen to me," replied Stephen grimly. "Good God, all my money's tied up in Gordoni's as well as his father's. He must be made to listen to reason and that's all about it."

"Well, if he hasn't done anything about it yet, he won't be able to do anything today, will he?" George reassured him. "In the meantime"—he went on more slowly—"in the meantime, if you want to have a look at the plan . . .?"

"Um?" Stephen stopped pacing the engine-room to look up quickly into George's face.

"He's got the plan with him somewhere—if you'd like to have a look at it?"

"What?"

"Forewarned's forearmed. He needn't know. I could—"

"Thanks, George," Stephen broke in hastily. "But it'll take a little thinking out before—"

"What have you got to think about on a lovely day like this?"

Both men started around to see Joyce Carter's legs descending the after gangway into the engine-room. Stephen pulled himself together quickly.

"I've always got to figure out how to keep you in mink, for instance," he managed to reply with a grin.

"Mink? In this weather? Don't make me wilt! Susan is swabbing the decks to keep *them* from wilting. What would you like me to do, Skipper? Our guests will be with us in a few moments."

"Get up into the wheelhouse, woman, and pour me some of the dog that bit me last night. *I've* got fur on my tongue even if *you* refuse to wear mink."

"And you deserve to have!" his wife assured him with mock severity. "Don't forget to shut the hatch after me, George. We don't want the smell of oil, however pure, in the cabins. Nancy on board yet?"

"Washing-up the breakfast things, I think," George replied.

"Oh, I must have missed her somewhere. Never mind. I'll see her later. I daresay she's got the food well organised?"

"You know Nancy."

"Yes. Then I'll get the skipper that drink he so badly needs."

"That's right—put me last," her husband addressed her retreating back before George closed the hatch. "Hey!" This last exclamation was jerked out of Stephen as a spray of water caught him in the middle of the back. He looked up in time to see Susan swinging the bucket she used for swabbing decks up on to its hook just inside the engine-room.

"What do you think you're doing?" he demanded.

"Sorry," she apologised, laughing. "I didn't know there was any water left in it."

The Old Salt's head appeared above the top step as she peered in to see what all the fuss was about.

"Well, make sure it's empty next time. You'll rust George's engines, to say nothing of the fishing gear stowed in that chest—and then you'll probably be keel-hauled. And take that cat somewhere else. She'll get herself into trouble one of these days, sticking her nose into everything."

Susan laughed again, dropping a pair of old canvas fishing gloves she used when swabbing the decks over the rim of the bucket before gathering up The Old Salt.

"Puss—you're not a bit popular. Neither am I. Let's go."

As the cat and his daughter's brown legs disappeared from view, Stephen heard her say, "Oh, good morning, Mr. Harris. Lovely day, isn't it?"

"Damn!" Stephen muttered to George. "They're coming aboard already. Think any of them heard anything?"

"Doesn't sound like it."

"No. Well—just between us for the time, George. I'll give it some thought during the day."

"You know where to find me if you want me."

Stephen gripped George's shoulder briefly, then he went aloft, leaving the other man tapping pensively at his engines with the heavy wrench.

A face appeared at the open hatchway for a moment, then whipped out of sight.

CHAPTER VI

BALMORAL BEACH was crowded already when Stephen Carter brought *Sea Spray* in carefully to an anchorage just outside the sharkproof net which was stretched across a large portion of the cove. He let the incoming tide swing the craft broadside on before dropping anchor so that his guests could dive straight into the pool from the boat and come back on board with the help of some wooden steps which he hung over the side. As the tide had nearly reached the full, these steps just overlapped the top of the net.

Most of those on board were soon in the water: the exceptions were Nancy Field at work in the galley, George in the engine-room, and Stephen Carter on deck to watch that the boat did not swing to foul the net.

Stephen also hoped for a little time to himself to think things out, but the swimmers were continually returning for a breather, or a cigarette and a chat with him. Probably imagined he would appreciate their company, he thought wryly, wishing them a hundred miles away except Gordoni, who, though he kept coming back on board, never came alone so that Stephen could have it out with him. On purpose? Stephen wondered. But how could Gordoni know that he knew about the plans? What if, if he faced him with it, Gordoni denied the story point-blank? What proof was there that George hadn't got it all wrong? He'd look a prize idiot if— Damn! Here were some more coming back for drinks. How could he get his thoughts organised?

At last, however, there came a time when he had the upper deck entirely to himself and he gazed out over the water to where the houses on shore stepped down from wooded heights to the semi-circle of golden sand with a sparkle of white walls and red roofs. The gum trees were hanging still around them. Not much breeze, he noted automatically, watching the *Sea Spray's* movements, although he had only just taken a turn on the anchor chain to check any tendency to drift. The other part of his mind revolved around Gordoni and that plan for a new-type engine. Gordoni shares would take a nose-dive for sure. Hell! They'd go bust. Why the devil didn't Gordoni take his sons into partnership? But, no. He believed they should work up from the ranks. Good idea, of course, but to an ambitious spendthrift like Marco, it wasn't quite good enough. Yet to ruin his father's business? Surely he wouldn't do that when it came to the point? But that was something he, for one, couldn't afford to be optimistic about. George wasn't optimistic about it, either, and George wasn't the sort to flap over trifles. What he had heard through that open hatchway had convinced him that Marco meant business, and dirty business at that. Something would have to be done. Stephen's stomach tightened. If Gordoni's went bust he might have to leave Thorntree Point—sell *Sea Spray*—start again. Impossible! Sell *Sea Spray*? It would be like tearing off a limb! There must be some way around this. Old Man Gordoni himself? Yes. He must be warned, of course. Damn it being Sunday and himself stuck out here on the harbour! He should be back home organising something. But supposing it was already too late for that? Supposing Marco had already got some backing somewhere?

The day grew suddenly colder although the sun still shone brilliantly, and the familiar clatter of dishes coming from the galley proclaimed that this day was just like any other day. Thumps rising from the engine-room spoke of George busy with the underwater gear for fishing later on. Give all this up just to satisfy the greed of one young man?

Stephen's mind darkened over. Insidiously, notions such as he hadn't allowed into it since Malaya began to form into

pictures. Pictures of Marco Gordoni swimming underwater and meeting with some accident! A shark; faulty gear; a spear fired by accident! Stephen went through them all until he shook himself away from such visions, horrified and disgusted with himself. If he couldn't deal with a situation like this without dreaming fondly of murder, there wasn't . . .

It was a piercing yowl that brought him back to the present with a start. He realised that he had been hearing it for some time, subconsciously. The Old Salt in trouble again with that inquisitive nose of hers?

Stephen heaved himself away from his thoughts to go to the rescue.

Thus it happened that when Susan and Peter came aboard a few moments later, dripping and in search of towels and sustenance, with Peter very attentive and trying to get back into Susan's good books, they found her father peering anxiously into cupboards and under benches with a soft stream of imprecations floating about his head.

"What've you lost, Skip?" his daughter demanded with a laugh.

"The Old Salt. I can't find her anywhere* and she's yowling like nobody's business. Blessed if I know what she's done with herself this time."

"We-a-ow-w-w!"

The hollow, frantic cry of a cat in the extremes of fright wiped the smile from Susan's face.

"Puss? Where are you?" she called urgently, seeking in well-known corners where The Old Salt had been trapped before.

Peter joined in the chase although cats bored him more than somewhat. Still, Susan's cat . . .

"Hey!" he cried, happening to look over the port rail. "She's here—in the water. Got a rope?"

Susan and her father came rushing to his side in time to see The Old Salt frantically treading water but sinking fast.

"Oh!" Susan gasped and, before either of the men could stop her, she had neatly dived overboard.

"Hell!" her father exploded. "Get in after her, Peter. Go on, man," he shouted as Peter hesitated questioningly.

Meeting Stephen's eye, he dived without further ado.

"Blasted cat!" snarled Stephen, but before the spray of Peter's dive had settled, he was down on his stomach on the deck waiting to haul the 'blasted cat' aboard when Susan came up with it terrified, coughing and snorting and with paws still mechanically treading water in the air.

Stephen grabbed it and dropped the soggy, half-stupefied animal gently on the deck where it crouched, shivering and crouching, while he leaned down to pull his daughter out as Peter gave her a push from below.

"Damned little fool!" he went on, snarling at her. "Why do you think I bring you to swim behind a shark net? So that you can dive in outside it? Little idiot! Need a hand up, Peter?" he asked, when his daughter had slid inboard to lie on her stomach beside him. But Peter Bowers was already swimming quickly away towards the stern, making a great splash and keeping a watch for sharks all the way.

Watching him, Stephen Carter grinned.

"Shark happy, that young man of yours. And don't you ever dive in where they're likely to be again either, do you hear? Good God, we're right opposite the Heads where they come in!"

"Would you like me to stand still and watch The Old Salt drown?" Susan flung back at him. "You're only mad because I got in first."

Stephen's grin widened at this and he gave his daughter a hearty slap as they both got to their feet to tend The Old Salt.

"Best squeeze the poor old thing out by the look of things and hang her up to dry," he said, but, although his words sounded alarming, his hands were gentle as he picked up the cat and applied a form of artificial respiration to help her get the water out of her lungs. "You silly old wreck!" he admonished the cat. "I thought you didn't like water?"

"Well, she wouldn't dive in of her own accord, that's certain," said Susan, indignantly. "She must have—"

They were interrupted by a shout from the stern.

"Mr. Carter!" Peter's voice rang out urgently. "Help!"

Stephen and his daughter stood still for a split second staring at each other, then he thrust the cat into her arms and leapt for the after-deck calling as he went, "Coming! George—on deck!"

Susan, clutching the still-gasping cat, followed quickly, reaching her father just as he leapt up on to the stern locker. They both looked down into the white, startled face of Peter Bowers, who was clinging to the short ladder that hung just below the lazily-flapping ensign.

"What's up?" Carter snapped out, impatient now that he could see that Bowers appeared in no need of help. If this was the young idiot's idea of a joke . . .!

"G-Gordon's down here," Bowers stammered. "S-stuck in the p-propellor. I—can't get him out!" The young man's voice cracked uncertainly. He swallowed hard and managed to force out, "He—he—looks—dead!"

By this time, George Field, lean and silent, had joined Stephen and Susan and, at Bowers's words, all three exchanged sudden glances, aghast, unbelieving, startled.

Carter and Field turned on Bowers, prepared to deal sternly with him, but one look at the greyness spreading under the young man's tanned skin convinced them that this was no practical joke as they had half suspected, and Carter went straight into action. He was over the side and down the ladder in seconds.

Peering through the clear, green water, he could see what Bowers had seen quite plainly and, for the second time that day, the sun lost its warmth.

For a moment, he hung there staring then, drawing a deep breath, he nodded up at George. No more was necessary, and George's mouth pursed thoughtfully.

"Susan," Carter turned to his daughter. "Get back to the wheelhouse and stay there, there's a good girl. Do as I say," he continued quickly as she opened her mouth to speak. "Quick smart!"

'Quick smart' was a term used only for emergencies when

sailing and had to be obeyed promptly and unquestioningly, so Susan carried The Old Salt back to the wheelhouse without another word.

Stephen Carter quickly returned to the task on hand and lowered himself, fully clothed, into the water until he was beside the figure of Marco Gordoni. It straddled the propellor shaft with arms and head wound around the blades in a manner that struck him as being unnatural even while he busied himself trying to dislodge the Italian.

He had to come up for air before he had the body entirely free and he beckoned Peter Bowers to follow him down and give him a hand.

"Wh-what about sh-sharks?" Bowers still stuttered as he stood on the rudder clutching it as if he could never let go. "Th-there was b-blood in the water wh-when I first saw him."

"Come and give a hand, blast you," Stephen snapped. "And don't keep harping on sharks. No—you stay up there, George." He stopped Field from coming down to take Bowers's place. "We'll want a hand up with him once he's freed. He's no light weight—and he's dead all right. No mistake about that. Come on, Peter! This is no time to get temperamental. Or do you want the sharks to get him, and me, too?"

Without waiting to see if the young man was following him, Carter went below the surface again.

This time, Bowers joined him, and his frantic efforts to get Gordoni out and up as soon as possible and so shorten the time he, himself, must spend in the water, soon had the body free. Field and Carter wasted no time in manhandling the body up on to the deck with Bowers scrambling up after them.

They laid Gordoni face downwards on the deck and Carter at once began artificial respiration although he knew that it was hopeless. He kept at it, however, until his clothes were nearly dry on his body with the heat of the sun and his own exertions but, at last, he gave up with a hopeless gesture and got to his feet.

George Field was staring thoughtfully at a slight pink stain that was now marking the deck and he bent down and rolled Gordoni's body over on to its back.

Stephen drew in a sharp breath and Peter Bowers sat down suddenly as if his legs would not hold him up any longer. All three men stared at the long, ugly cuts that raked the Italian's chest and stomach above the minute swimming trunks he was wearing.

George bent low to examine the wounds more closely.

"Barnacles," he muttered. "Not deep enough to kill him, though." His eyes moved down to Gordoni's ankles and rested there. Weals and bruises encircled the left ankle where something had gripped it quite recently.

His eyes met Stephen's in a shared awareness of the significance of those bruises.

It was Nancy Field's voice breaking into the silence that aroused them from the state of shock.

"I thought I heard somebody call for help . . . Oh, whatever's happened to Mr. Gordoni? Has he hurt himself? Dear, dear! I'll get some salve for those cuts of his."

"No need for salve, Nan," her husband's grunted words stopped her as she was turning away. "He's dead."

"Wha-what?" Mrs. Field caught her breath.

Her husband nodded.

"Drowned," he added.

Stephen Carter gave him a swift glance, then remained silent. Perhaps it was better not to mention that bruised ankle any sooner than was needful.

"Are—are you sure, George?" she quavered.

George nodded.

Nancy Field's practical nature reasserted itself, steadying her voice and setting first things in their rightful places.

"Then, you'd better get a doctor, George."

There was silence for a moment, then Stephen spoke.

"She's right. And we'd best make for home straight away."

Again George nodded, saying, "I'll start up the engines." He looked down once more at Gordoni, this time with something like distaste. It was almost as if he was annoyed with the man for being dead on his friend's boat. "We'd better do something with him before the others come aboard. Just can't leave him out here like that."

"No."

Stephen looked rather dazedly around at Peter Bowers who was still staring wide-eyed at Marco Gordoni.

"You feel up to helping us carry him below, son?" he heard himself asking as if from a distance. His mind wasn't working too briskly yet so how the devil did he know what to do or say in a situation like this, he wondered.

"Mmm?" Bowers peered up at him unseeingly. "I keep thinking—if I hadn't seen him—the sharks might have . . ."

"Cut that out!" George's voice snapped out suddenly. "Pity they didn't. It would've saved all this mess. But they didn't—so let's have no more talk like that. Just you help us carry him down . . ."

Stephen and Nancy were blinking up at George in some surprise. Usually his voice never rose above a monotonous level. And then—

"Marco!"

All heads jerked around to see Betty Kelleher standing behind them, staring down at Gordoni.

"Betty . . ."

Stephen started forward with the intention of turning her back, when her husband came around the wheelhouse rubbing his head with a towel and followed by Warren Harris, also towelling his grey hair back into its usual smooth neatness.

"Water's fine, Steve," John was saying jovially, when he saw the look on his wife's face and broke off. "What's up, old girl?"

"Take her away, John," said Stephen. "We've had a bit of an accident here and—"

"Why is he lying there like that?" Betty demanded. Her finger pointed to the cuts lacerating Gordoni's body. "What's happened to him? Those cuts . . ." She caught her breath. "He's—not breathing!"

Warren Harris stood absolutely still. Only his eyes were visible above the towel and they moved slowly, almost reluctantly, downwards towards Gordoni.

John looked past his wife in the same direction, then back

to Stephen who made the significant 'thumbs down' sign. Kelleher opened his mouth to speak when they were all struck dumb as Betty shook with uncontrollable laughter.

"He's dead, that's what it is. Ha, ha, ha! That's what you mean, isn't it? He's dead? Ha, ha, ha!"

Peter's face turned grey and he put his head over the side and was sick.

Stephen clawed his hands through his hair as Betty's laughter went on and on.

"Do something!" he clipped out at John. "Shut her up, for God's sake!"

The other man, who had been watching his wife with a strange expression on his face, started at Carter's explosion and slowly raised his closed fist. With a quick, efficient jerk, he knocked her out cold. Catching her limp form in his arms, he mumbled apologetically, "Sorry. Only way I know."

Warren Harris gave a sharp exclamation, hastily snothered, and Stephen drew a deep breath, shocked and embarrassed.

"Best thing to do, I suppose," he muttered. "Get her below and stay with her. We'll see to this."

John nodded and carried his wife away followed by Nancy who was murmuring disapprovingly, "Perhaps a little brandy. . . . Oh, dear, need you have knocked her right out like that? Tck, tck, tck!"

Stephen turned back to Gordoni, jaw tight and grim.

"Come on, George," he said. "Looks like it's up to us. The lad's no use."

"The tough-looking ones always get it worst," agreed George.

"Oh, wait a minute," Stephen straightened suddenly. "I'll get Susan out of the way." He stopped abruptly on his way to the wheelhouse as he noticed Harris standing there. "You all right, Harris?"

"Um? Oh! Yes, yes, of course. Anything I can do?"

"Damn right!" snapped Carter. "Give George a hand to get him below while I clear the way, will you? God! What a mess!" And he hurried away without waiting to see if Harris did as he had been asked.

He soon had a comforting arm around his daughter as she sat, taut and pale, in the wheelhouse.

"It's all right, Sue. Don't panic, but see if you can get your mother on board without any fuss, mmm? And don't tell Tina anything. I'll fix it."

"What happened?" asked Susan, big-eyed.

"It's Gordoni, all right. An accident," he said, briefly. "But no more questions now, there's the girl. Just get your mother and Tina back on board—and don't tell either of them anything. Just say I want to get off home. Don't want the whole beach to know something's wrong. Okay?"

"All right."

After Susan had gone off, shakily but willing herself to be calm, her father absent-mindedly stroked The Old Salt's wet fur and stared into space until George and Harris came in carrying Gordoni. All three men hefted the dead weight down the gangway to the cabin the Gordonis had been using.

When the Italian had been laid on the bunk, George hung back when the others moved to the door. Stephen looked back at him questioningly.

"What's up?"

"Um?" George started. "Oh—if there's going to be trouble, and there is, hadn't we better lock the door? I was just looking for the key."

Stephen glanced down at the lock on the door.

"Key's in the lock. Good idea. Come out and I'll lock up, then."

George frowned slightly yet he stepped out readily enough and watched Stephen lock the door and pocket the key, but his fingers toyed with his shirt pocket and a worried look showed in his eyes for a moment. However, when Stephen turned back to him, he was staring after Warren Harris who was returning to his own cabin after muttering something about changing while he wound or unwound his towel around his arms abstractedly.

"This is a bloody mess, George," Stephen murmured.

"Bloody," George agreed.

"Have to make the best of it. Do that better at the home base."

George had opened his mouth to say something when Stephen continued in lowered tones, "George—you didn't have anything to do with this, did you?"

George squinted at him.

"Well?" Stephen insisted.

"Why me?"

"I don't know. I can't help feeling . . . God! It's awful—but I remember a certain Jap in Malaya—finishing up something like this."

"It was either the Nip or you then, Steve," George replied, levelly.

"I know . . . but after what you said this morning, well—this has come at just the right time, hasn't it?"

George still squinted at Stephen, then slowly shook his head.

"Not me, Steve. I thought perhaps you . . .?" He paused significantly.

Remembering his wishful thinking earlier, Stephen stood there aghast.

"Hell!" he exclaimed at last. "We must keep that plan business quiet now, George."

Again George squinted.

"You bet. Be questions asked. Bound to be. Only lead to more trouble."

"And we'll have enough as it is," Stephen asserted grimly. "We'll have the police nosing about . . . Hell!"

"Less said the better," George agreed, flickering a warning glance in the direction of Harris's cabin. "Best get the engines started up, then."

Stephen nodded, and the two men parted, one to go to the engine-room and the other to go aloft to the wheelhouse where Susan was now standing with her mother and Tina Gordoni. Neither of the two older women looked more than ordinarily worried so Susan must have done her job well, thought her father gratefully. Then he drew a deep breath and told them what had happened.

A stunned silence followed, and Stephen waited uneasily for whatever was to come.

His wife's blue eyes were begging him to deny his own words. Susan stared out unseeingly across the bay with its mass of happy bathers shouting and laughing in the sparkling sunshine. Tina Gordoni's eyes were fast shut as though she had suffered a mortal wound.

"I don't believe it," whispered Joyce Carter.

"It's true, hon," Stephen replied softly, watching Tina anxiously. How would she take it? Screaming hysterics like Betty or . . . ? He was just in time to catch her as she slid off the seat in a dead faint.

"Passed out," he gasped, gratefully. "Thank goodness! Best thing for her. I'll take her down to our cabin, hon. He's in theirs. You okay, Sue?"

"Y-yes—but it's—not happening, is it? Not—to us?"

Joyce's arm was around her daughter's shoulder in a trice.

"Hang on, darling. Hang on. Come below with me, that's the girl. I'll need some help with poor Tina. Oh, the poor soul! The poor soul! Come along, dear, and help us lift her down the gangway."

The three of them gently lowered Tina down and into the double cabin the Carters used. She looked so small and—crumpled lying on the bunk that Susan's heart contracted. How did it *feel* to have someone you loved taken away so suddenly—and for ever? Supposing it had been—Daddy, for instance?

A hollow feeling gripped her around the middle and she had to fold her arms over her stomach hard to prevent herself being sick.

Meanwhile, Stephen was kissing his wife's cheeks as he turned to leave.

"Pecker up, sweetheart. I'm going to up anchor and get us back home double quick. We'll have to get official help with this. You realise that?"

"Wh-what will that mean?"

"Well . . . he's a foreign visitor . . . accidental death . . . I

don't know what it'll mean in the finish. C.I.B. for a certainty."

"Oh!" Joyce drew in a shocked breath. "Not the police?"

"'Fraid so. We don't know how it happened, you see."

His wife stared back at him in horror.

CHAPTER VII

"AND THAT was it," Stephen Carter concluded as he gave the inspector certain of the previous facts which concerned himself, naturally omitting those unknown to him and some which he considered better not to mention.

"Mmm," Inspector Nichols bit his lips thoughtfully. "And you are all agreed that that was a fair recital of events—on the face of it?" He looked from one to the other questioningly.

Stephen frowned.

"What do you mean—on the face of it? Do you think we're concealing something?"

The inspector smiled.

"Must be, Mr. Carter. Your almanac of events includes nothing about a murder—and Marco Gordoni was murdered."

"Mur—?"

Then silence. Electric silence.

"Yes." Nichols's voice fell casually on to the still air. "We are reasonably certain that he was murdered."

His eyes flicked around the faces turned towards him.

Mrs. Carter's blue eyes were wide and incredulous. Her daughter's were just as wide, but startled and shocked. Beautiful eyes! Abruptly, Nichols forced himself to pass on to the others. Peter Bowers sported a greyish-green pallor under his skin, while Warren Harris had taken a cigarette out of his case and was regarding it as if wondering what it could be. Only

Stephen Carter's expression had not changed, but he had held his breath for a long moment before letting it out slowly and carefully. John Kelleher was gazing at his wife, his expression unreadable. She was frankly gaping at himself with—was it terror? Then she suddenly gave a choking sort of gasp and fainted, falling out of her chair before her husband, seated on the arm of it, could move to catch her.

In the confusion that followed, all these promising threads were scattered. Stephen Carter leapt to help Kelleher lift his wife. Joyce Carter rushed for brandy from the cocktail cabinet, and Susan Carter ran towards the door.

The inspector's arm stopped her. Gently, he shook his head.

"I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to stay in here, Miss Carter," he said.

She looked at him, bewildered.

"But—I'm only going to get Nancy," she replied.

"Nancy?"

"Yes. She always knows what to do when . . ." The girl waved her hand vaguely in Mrs. Kelleher's direction, and then she stiffened. "Oh! Do you mean we're under arrest?"

"Of course not, Miss Carter, but the doctor may be busy in the hall. The ambulance, you know? I'd prefer it if you would allow me to send my assistant for—your housekeeper, is it?"

"Y-yes. She's looking after Tina—Mrs. Gordoni—upstairs."

The girl was staring at him as if he were a taipan, or some other deadly reptile, Nichols realised with a pang of regret. He also realised that her nearness was having quite the opposite effect upon himself. His mind showed a tendency to wander away from the job in hand and he had to bring it back quite firmly. Walking over to the door to give Tom Burton instructions helped a little.

"Outside, Tom," he said, and when they were both out in the hall, asked, "What do you make of it?"

"Lovely!" moaned Tom, grimacing.

"Mrs. Kelleher seems more than a little upset."

"You're not kidding! She was in love with the Boy in the Bikini, of course—and if her husband didn't know about it before he does now—unless he's bone from the eyebrows up

which is more than likely by the look of him. My money's on him all the same."

"Psychic again?" the inspector quirked an eyebrow at him. "Never mind. You'll recover. In the meantime, bring the housekeeper down, there's a good lad. The exercise will do you good." When Tom, poking a face, leapt for the stairs, Nichols turned to the stalwart outside the door. "Doc finished up, Jones?"

"He's gone, sir. All clear."

The inspector nodded and returned to the living-room where he found Warren Harris and Peter Bowers standing helplessly by while everybody else did various things designed to bring Mrs. Kellcher back to consciousness and all failing dismally so far. And so it remained until Tom Burton returned accompanied by Nancy Field who immediately scattered the crowd keeping air from the patient and set about dealing efficiently with her until she was soon stirring back to life.

While they stood watching from the sidelines, the inspector and Tom Burton quietly spoke together.

"The Doc had to give Gordoni's wife a shot in the arm to keep her quiet. She's out."

Nichols grimaced disappointedly.

"For how long?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. So now—can we eat? My stomach thinks its throat's been cut."

The inspector nodded feelingly.

"Mine, too!"

Joyce Carter, happening to overhear this, came forward apologetically.

"Inspector—how remiss of me! Of course you must have some lunch with us. I expect we'll just have sandwiches and coffee—if any of us feels like eating anything. However, a sinking feeling won't help us to cope, so we'd better have something. Would sandwiches and coffee be adequate for you, Inspector?"

"Of course—and I hope it won't be too much trouble for you?"

"Not at all." She turned her head. "Nancy . . . just a

moment. Nancy—this is Inspector Nichols, and he hasn't had any lunch."

Nichols smiled down at Nancy Field who was staring back at him with lively curiosity.

"My assistants are hungry too, Mrs. Field. Do you think you could manage some sandwiches and coffee for us all?"

"Of course. Where would you like to have it?"

"Most of us will have to eat where we happen to be working, I'm afraid, Mrs. Carter," he turned apologetically to Joyce.

"Just do whatever you think best, Inspector. Nancy will see to you."

"All right, Mrs. Field?"

"Yes, Inspector. My husband and I can take it to you wherever you are. How many of you are there?"

"Er—one, two . . . eight of us."

"That's all right, then."

"Thanks. Sorry to put you to all this extra work."

"If I can't whip up a few sandwiches now and again I should be in another job," replied Nancy forthrightly.

The inspector smiled down at her gratefully.

"Thanks. How is Mrs. Kelleher, by the way?" he turned to ask Joyce Carter as Nancy went on her way.

"She should go upstairs and lie down—if you don't want her for anything more, Inspector?"

"A very good idea. The doctor has gone with—mmm—well, you can move about the house now. I'm afraid that's all though until I have completed certain investigations outside."

"Oh. Thank you."

Stephen came up beside his wife at that moment and put his arm comfortingly about her waist, and the inspector included him in his friendly smile.

"I'm going to have a look at the yacht, Mr. Carter, if you will come and show us around?"

"Of course. Anything."

"Tom—get the boys down there, will you?"

Tom nodded and went out into the hall. Stephen, at a nod from the inspector, led the way out into the garden, touching

his wife and daughter on the shoulder reassuringly as he went.

Susan watched them go with feelings so mixed that she found it hard to recognise any one of them. All she knew for certain was that the glint of ash-blond in the inspector's sandy hair as he walked away from her across the lawn with her father, did not do one little thing to help.

She stood at the window until the inspector's lively-eyed assistant joined him with two other men carrying cameras and black bags and looking so unlike film detectives that they seemed even more horrifying to her because of it. To see them on her own lawn was . . . was too like a nightmare to be real. Yet she only had to turn her head to see Betty Kelleher's ravaged face and to know that it was no dream.

Her mother now came over to her side, having sent Betty on her way upstairs attended by her husband and Nancy. She put her arm around her daughter and held her tight.

"It'll be all right, Sue. Try not to worry too much."

"But—murder he said it was, Mother. How? Why?"

"I'm finding it difficult to believe I'm actually hearing and seeing the things I do, too," her mother agreed with the same bewilderment in her voice. "Let's hope that young inspector is good at his job—and, somehow, I fancy he is—then we'll know a bit more about it soon."

Susan was suddenly still. She turned to her mother as if about to say something and then a shiver shook through her before she could control it as she decided to say nothing after all.

Yet her mother had felt the shiver.

"What is it, dear?"

"Nothing. Just—it's too horrible!"

Mrs. Carter gave her a quick hug and said, "Come on. Let's make a cup of tea. All very well for Daddy to talk about coffee. Tea's the thing for times like these. Come along . . . and don't take it all too seriously, pet. Detectives have made mistakes before today."

"What *made* him say it was—murder?" Susan persisted.

"Nobody has bothered to tell us now you come to mention it," her mother retorted dryly. "Trust Betty to make a stir at

exactly the wrong time ! Just when we might have heard something interesting ! Ah, well, no more delving into things we know nothing about. Tea for us. Let Daddy sort it all out with that inspector."

CHAPTER VIII

Sea Spray looked wonderful to Inspector Nichols as he stood at the top of the path with Stephen Carter. Her wheelhouse was glistening its brass in the clear sunlight in the centre of well-scrubbed decks, and the whole length of the yacht's graceful lines gleamed with the loving care and attention of careful owners.

"Jove, she's a beauty!" he exclaimed, involuntarily.

Beside him, Bob Grey's eyes glistened as brightly as the yacht's brasswork and he gave a piercing wolf whistle as he disentangled exposure meter and camera. Catching him before he vanished down the track, the inspector remarked cryptically, "Stern, rudder, wheelhouse, full front, side, and one from up here, Bob. Go to work, Jacko. Cover the same spots as Bob for the moment. More later."

"Oke."

The two men rattled off downwards, followed, cautiously and silently, by a suspicious Old Salt who had appeared from nowhere as if by magic, scenting the atmosphere of excitement from afar.

When he turned back towards Stephen Carter, the inspector saw a flicker of a smile on his face for the first time since they had met.

"You like boats?" Stephen asked him.

"Love 'em!" he replied, resting his arms on the stone parapet and staring downwards admiringly.

The reply was short yet Stephen felt himself warming a little towards this young man who was, perhaps, preparing to turn his world upside-down.

"But," Trevor continued, freezing the tiny warm glow immediately. "But, while the boys are doing their routine jobs down there, you might put me a little further into the picture now that we've got the—er—scene of the crime, as you might say, in front of us. Tom," he went on without moving. "Make a sketch from here, would you? Then we can get an idea of angles."

Tom Burton, standing beside the phlegmatic, muscular Jones, now wore his hat well over his eyes. He pretended that the sun was bad for his complexion. He also claimed to see more from under that hatbrim than the inspector who relied mainly on his sunny smile to disarm his victims, Tom insisted against all argument. Without moving this concealing headgear, therefore, Tom drew out his notebook and, although an onlooker would have sworn he could not have seen anything from under that brim, he soon had a workmanlike sketch of the yacht in his book.

"Jones," the inspector continued, "you will see to it that the yacht is not overrun by reporters when the news gets out. I'd hate to see them swarming all over that lovely thing. Or anybody else. That goes without saying."

Jones nodded and grunted something, but the inspector seemed to find it satisfactory.

"Now—let's get a few positions fixed. Mr. Carter, where were you exactly when you heard the cat yowling?"

Stephen rammed his hands deep into the pockets of the sports jacket he wore over an open-necked shirt and brown linen slacks.

"Starboard," he jerked out. "I was leaning against the wheelhouse—facing inshore—watching the swimmers."

"Who were?"

"My wife and daughter, Peter Bowers, Mr. and Mrs. Kelleher, Gordoni and his wife, Warren Harris, and about three hundred others quite unknown to me."

Ignoring the terse note that had crept into Carter's voice

while he had been speaking, the inspector went on smoothly. "You saw them all? All in your own party, I mean? The whole time?"

"How could I?" was the impatient reply. "They were swimming about here and there. I can't say I watched them every minute, either. There was the anchor chain to keep an eye on—making sure the boat didn't get caught by a sudden gust of wind and foul the net—we were anchored just outside it so that my guests could dive straight in from the side gangway."

"Which was—where?" came the persistent questions.

"Just beside the wheelhouse where I was standing—star-board side."

"Anybody come aboard at any time?"

"*Everybody* from time to time to have a drink or a cigarette. You know how it is. They were coming and going most of the time—all except my wife who likes to swim herself out, change into dry clothes and finish for the day."

"Gordoni, I suppose, came aboard?"

"Yes, several times. As a matter of fact, now I come to think of it, John had just brought him aboard for a drink not long before—well, it couldn't have been long before—we found him."

The inspector's eyes sharpened.

"How long before?"

"Anything up to twenty minutes, I fancy," was the thoughtful reply. "But I saw him swimming about after that—I think. Must have, surely? It's so difficult to place these things when you weren't taking particular notice at the time."

"Mmm. Well, let's get back to the cat again—where was it when you found it in the water?"

A look of surprise crossed Carter's face.

"What *does* it matter where she was?" he asked again.

"You never know," was the non-committal reply. "Anyway, I like to have the full picture in my mind's eye—especially when most of it is water where there aren't any landmarks to help me."

"I see! Yes—I hadn't thought of that. Of course, it makes

things very difficult for you, doesn't it? Then—let me see if I can get it exact for you—I was on the starboard side facing inshore, therefore she would have been on the port side."

"Whereabouts along the boat's length, Mr. Carter?"

"I've got it now—just overside between the wheelhouse and the engine-room hatch. I remember I put her straight up on that wooden bench you can see running along the engine-room cover there." He pointed down at the yacht. "You can see it quite plainly from here."

The inspector nodded then spoke over his shoulder to Tom Burton. "Mark those places, Tom."

Tom grunted. Two crosses had already appeared on his sketch, one marked *cat* and the other marked *S.C.*, both on the starboard side.

"Who else was on board at the time, Mr. Carter?" continued Nichols.

"Nancy Field was in the galley, and—"

"How do you know that for certain?"

Stephen Carter paused to eye the inspector carefully. Then—"I heard the clatter of plates from below while—"

"What made you take particular notice of such a very ordinary noise?" the inspector interrupted persistently.

"I don't know, exactly. I only know I remember hearing it—enjoying it, if you like—thinking ahead to lunch-time, perhaps? I suppose it stayed in my memory as the commonplace against the unbelievable that followed soon after."

"That's possible. Where is the galley, then?"

"I could show you better on board, Inspector."

"Okay. We'll go down. The boys must be nearly through by now."

The group walked down to the landing-stage and the inspector hailed Bob Grey who could be seen in the shadow of the wheelhouse changing a film in his camera.

His head jerked up questioningly.

"All through?" asked the inspector.

"I've got my lot, Trev," was the answer. When out of sight and sound of official premises, official titles went by the board in the inspector's team—at his own request.

"Okay," Nichols nodded. "Where's Jacko?"

"Down below sorting out what he's got."

"Ask him if he's finished up here, will you? I wouldn't want to foul any of his prints."

"You'd be a brave man," Bob assured him.

Stephen Carter stood by during this exchange looking from one young man to the other in some surprise. This was not the behaviour he had expected from the C.I.B.—but it wouldn't do to imagine that they got where they were by being as birdbrained as they sounded, he decided warily, as Bob Grey drew his head back into the wheelhouse and shouted:

"Jacko—you through up here? Trev wants to know."

A stream of colourful invective rose from the interior of the yacht as Jacko forcefully demanded to know why millions of people had to walk around boats mauling every inch of woodwork and brass!

When it died away, Bob turned around with an appreciative grin.

"He says 'Yes'."

The inspector chuckled, and Stephen felt himself smiling involuntarily. At any other time, he felt he might have enjoyed the company of these young men.

"Right," said Nichols. "Stay on shore, Jones. We can go aboard now, Mr. Carter. After you. Bob—take a few interiors to give us an idea of the general lay-out below, will you?"

"Oke."

Gathering up his gear, Bob disappeared from sight down a gangway set into the wheelhouse floor, and Trevor, Stephen and Tom stepped on to the fore-deck.

"Jove, she is a beauty!" the inspector exclaimed once more, his eyes passing lovingly over the gleaming woodwork and on into the wheelhouse where, apart from the full-sized wheel and compass, a table had been fixed into the deck timbers with cushioned seats around three sides of it so that meals could be taken there as well as chart readings. He sighed enviously.

Leading the way into the wheelhouse, Stephen Carter

pointed to a panel let into the rear of this compartment.

"That's a kind of service lift we've rigged up. Comes direct from the galley below." He bent over and pulled the panel outwards to reveal a square opening through which the galley could be seen. Then he said with a slight smile, "So you see it would be remarkable if I couldn't hear dishes rattling."

The inspector did not reply, merely peering in interestedly and gesturing to Tom to make a sketch of its position.

"Mmm," he said, straightening up again. "Anyone else on board?"

"Nancy's husband, George, was in the engine-room aft."

"Sure?"

Carter stiffened.

"You can take my word for it that if I'd asked George to stand by in the engine-room in case we had to move quickly to avoid fouling the net then that's where he'd be until further orders."

"And had you asked him to do just that?"

"I had."

"I see. Well, we'll take a look at it, then."

"You can go down this gangway here," Carter pointed to the opening almost at his feet where the sliding cover had been pushed back to reveal a steep, narrow gangway leading down to the cabins. "Or else you can go around to the after-hatch along the deck that way."

The inspector indicated the after-hatch and Carter led them outside, explaining that he and George nearly always used this way as Mrs. Carter liked the interior hatch between the engine-room and the cabins kept closed. She didn't care for the smell of oil.

Nichols could still sense a hint of stiffness in his manner and wondered why a question about George Field's whereabouts should have such an effect. However, he made no comment about it.

When the three men filed down into the engine-room, they found it as neat and clean as any hospital ward. The only untidy spot was the top of a locker where an array of fishing gear lay jumbled together.

As the incongruity of this struck him, Nichols asked, "Is that gear usually left about like that?"

"George was evidently sorting it out ready for fishing when—well—when we had to drop everything and make for home. He hasn't had time to put it away again, I guess."

"Oh, yes—I meant to ask you about that. Why didn't you report the accident from Balmoral?"

Stephen paused before answering.

"Home seemed the best place, Inspector," he said, choosing his words carefully. "I don't know if you can understand that. There was no other reason, I assure you, but whenever something sticky turns up, I always make for home. Besides, we knew he was dead. If there'd been any chance, of course, I'd have called for a doctor from the nearest telephone. I really only tried artificial respiration because it seemed dreadful to do nothing at all."

It was Trevor's turn to look thoughtful.

"Mmm," he said. Then, after a moment's silence during which Stephen gave him a few searching glances, trying to figure out which way his brain was working, and Tom observed Stephen doing it from under his hat, he asked, "All the others were swimming, you say?"

"I couldn't swear to that, you know."

"Ah. So you said. Now, when he came aboard, Gordoni had a drink with you and Kelleher, is that right?"

"Yes."

"Did he stay on board 'or long?"

"I remember that we chatted for a bit, then I had to go and give the anchor chain a turn. Yes. That's right. And when I went back they'd both gone swimming again. I suppose he was there for a quarter of an hour before that. No more."

The detective's eyes sharpened.

"Did you actually see them go into the water?"

Stephen Carter raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"Well, they weren't on deck. I just assumed . . ." He shrugged. "To tell the truth, I didn't notice where they went, I suppose."

"I see. You said you were looking for the cat when your daughter and Bowers came on board," the inspector sprang on to a new topic.

"That's right."

"And there's no accounting for the cat being in the water?"

"I can't account for it, at any rate. I can only guess that she must have slipped and fallen."

"Has she ever done such a thing before?"

While he spoke, Nichols opened the inner hatch to see what lay beyond. It opened easily and noiselessly and led out into an alleyway between the galley on the right and a shower on the left with the main cabin directly ahead and the smaller cabins beyond.

"No," replied Stephen thoughtfully, eyeing Nichols's actions questioningly. "That's the odd thing about it, she hasn't."

"Odd thing about Gordoni being outside the net, too, wasn't it?" asked Nichols, drawing his head back into the engine-room. "Was he swimming there?"

"I didn't *see* him swimming there, and I'd warned everybody and Gordoni, in particular, about the possibility of sharks. In the Mediterranean I believe they don't think about such things and I didn't want any accidents . . ." He stopped, appalled. "I didn't want any accidents! Good God! And look what happened!"

Nichols smiled sympathetically and asked to be shown around the cabins.

Tom's pencil flew to sketch them in as they went, marking who had used them during the week-end, and the inspector was soon able to send Stephen Carter up to the house to have lunch with the promise of a further interview later. At present, the inspector wanted to have a few moments to talk things over with Tom before going any further.

After Carter had gone, the two detectives went to sit on the stern locker to examine the sketches Tom had made.

"Harris and Bowers in the main cabin nearest to the galley and the engine-room, eh?" said Nichols thoughtfully at last. "And this sketch looking down on the decks should be useful. The position of that after-hatch interests me. If it were to

be left open and hanging loose, it would provide cover from the shore for anyone bound from the engine-room to the port-side deck with intent, wouldn't you say?"

"Where Pussy was in the drink," came a murmur from under the lowered hatbrim of his assistant.

The inspector eyed him quizzically.

"You think it's got some bearing on events, do you?"

Tom pulled his hat still further over his face and stretched himself out on his back, hands clasped behind his head.

"Pussy doesn't like water. So Pussy didn't jump in. If Pussy didn't jump, Pussy was pushed—or knocked. Why?"

"Pussy making big yowls took someone away from the gangway the swimmers were using. I wonder if that was it, Tom? Those bruises on the ankle—could someone yank Gordoni off the gangway just as he was going up it, knock him on the head, and sink him before Miss Carter and Bowers came on board and after Mr. Carter went to look for Puss?"

"Pussy made a nice diversion for something," murmured Tom.

"Or did someone come through the engine-room out on to the portside deck, find Gordoni standing there alone, decide on the spur of the moment to knock him off and, accidentally, knocked Puss off as well?"

"Wow! You do get complicated!" Tom moaned. "Now, getting back to my first choice, Kelleher . . . he was on board with the bod, wasn't he? He needn't have gone through the engine-room that you're so fond of at all. He only had to jump on the unsuspecting Gordoni while Carter was toying with the anchor and go overside with him—knocking Puss off in transit. *And*—it mightn't have happened that way at all. They've got some darned useful underwater gear mixed up with that fishing tackle."

"So I noticed."

Slight pause.

"Hope it's not the redhead's old man," Tom mumbled. "But he's worried about something. Did you notice that as well? Every time you mention George Field he gets the needle."

"I think we must have a good look at George. And we'll get Carter to take us to Balmoral in the yacht tomorrow, too. Get a few measurements into our heads. We might even take a dive and see what we can find underwater. Too late today by the time we've fetched our gear from Bondi after we've been over the yacht with a fine toothcomb. And I'd like Carter to show us exactly where the yacht was anchored. Be a lesson to him not to move the corpse from the scene of the crime next time."

Tom chuckled.

"Next time? I bet *he* doesn't want a next time. And one thing we're not going to find down below is the copper's good old stand-by, fingerprints. You know that, don't you? Wish I'd thought of committing a few crimes under water. All fingerprints washed clean away or erased by sand action—according to the manual."

"Might find the blunt instrument," Nichols suggested.

"Do you think anyone in their right minds would make it easy for us by dropping things around the sea bed?" grunted Tom.

"They all make mistakes, otherwise we wouldn't catch any of them."

"According to the manual!" was Tom's sour reply. "Oh, brother, I can hardly wait till we get down outside that net. Sharkie-boy, look who's here? Your old pal, Juicy Thomas! Who wants first nip?"

Nichols grinned. Then—

"Talking of bites—here comes lunch I think."

Tom sat up instantly. "Where?"

"Coming down the track. George, do you think?"

"Must be. I like the look of those baskets he's carrying."

George was indeed a welcome sight to hungry men. He came down the track carrying a large basket in either hand. One was covered by a snowy napkin, the other bristled with Thermos flask.

There was a slight delay while he stopped to minister to Jones before coming on board and towards the two men sitting on the stern locker.

He eyed them sharply as he came. Youngsters, he sniffed. Smart alecks. Specially the one with the hat tilted like a Yankee tout. Didn't the C.I.B. think this was important enough to send one of the Big Boys, then? George's mouth drooped sourly, but there was a satisfied gleam in his eye, for all that. However, his face was expressionless by the time he stood in front of the 'smart alecks'.

"You must be George Field," the fair one said to him.

"That's me. I've brought your lunch."

He put the two baskets down and handed out two flasks of coffee and some cups. Then he whipped back the napkin to disclose a substantial assortment of sandwiches with cardboard plates in attendance.

"Ham and pineapple, cheese and gherkin, curried egg. Help yourselves."

Tom Burton needed no second invitation, and helped himself and Inspector Nichols to a formidable pile of the food while Nichols spoke to George Field over his head.

"You've a couple of good engines down there," he said, nodding towards the engine-room.

"The best," was the short reply.

"Nice fishing gear, too."

George gave him a sharp glance.

"Shouldn't be out. Haven't had time to stow it away."

"You wouldn't know if any was missing, then?"

"Missing? Why should any be missing? If somebody's been messing around . . .!" Field turned to go into the engine-room, when the inspector stopped him.

"Not now. I'll tell you when you can go below again."

George glared, and Inspector Nichols turned away casually and occupied himself unscrewing his Thermos flask.

"Who's the underwater fisherman?" he asked just as casually. He could feel those eyes boring into him before the slow reply came.

"We all do a bit of it. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. I do a bit myself and I was interested, that's all."

Silence fell during which the inspector carefully selected

a sandwich. Tom was already munching with a blissful expression on his face.

"You were on board when the accident took place, weren't you?" Nichols went on, still casually.

"I don't know when it happened," was the cautious reply.

"Oh, break it down," Nichols exclaimed. "You were on board all the time, weren't you? Or weren't you?"

"I was," still cautiously.

"Well, then—don't go getting mysterious for no reason, man. Where were you?"

George glared for a moment then he jerked a thumb towards the engine-room without speaking.

"Did you stay there all the time?"

George took a moment to think this over.

"Think so. Don't remember."

Nichols looked up at him quizzically.

"Would you remember if you knew what Mr. Carter has already told me, I wonder?"

George said nothing to this.

"Mmm. Well—try to remember a bit more by the time I come up to the house, will you? A man has been murdered, you know." He nodded dismissal.

Without a word, George turned and walked away.

When he was out of earshot, Nichols murmured, "So he wasn't surprised that it was murder, Tom . . . and he wasn't there when I told the others."

Tom grunted with his mouth full and made a few notes on the previous conversation.

The Old Salt chose this moment to leap out of the engine-room hatchway. Seeing George and catching the scent of food in those ever-questing nostrils of hers, she bounded after him as he went up the track.

Tom chuckled as he watched her.

"Wonder what Chiefee'd say if we wrote in our report: Star Witness—Tabby Cat. Name—The Old Salt?"

The inspector looked wistful.

"If only the little blighter could talk!"

"She might have even upped a claw and raked Gordoni's chest herself!"

"Eat up big," Trevor recommended kindly. "When you've filled those empty spaces within you won't see so many visions."

His friend and colleague remained unmoved.

"Got a better idea?"

"I'll tell you when we hear more from the doc, question the people concerned, find the whatever-it-was that clocked Gordoni on the skull, and who used it and why."

"Oh, brother! How safe can you play it!" Tom moaned disgustedly.

Just then, Bob Grey and Jacko came up on deck from below.

"Ye gods!" the inspector exclaimed. "I'd forgotten you were there. Nip up to the house and grab yourselves some sandwiches and coffee—quick!"

"The forgotten legion, Jacko. That's us," the photographer replied, grimly eyeing the diminished pile of sandwiches on the stern locker.

The inspector grinned.

"At least I'm giving you time to eat before sending you back to base to develop those beautiful pictures you've been taking. Do that, will you, joking aside? Then wait at base for me. Okay?"

"Oke. Push off, Jacko, before he reverses those instructions."

Photographer and fingerprint expert rocketed up the track with their gear swinging around them.

Inspector Nichols, now a new man, rose to his feet.

"Jones," he called. "Come aboard, will you? On your feet, Tom. Let's give this beautiful piece of yacht the once-over now that those two have finished—stem to stern. Get to know her. Look for blunt instruments. Measure her up. And—"

Tom completed the sentence for him dramatically.

". . . search for 'cloos'. Hah! Too easy! What'll you bet we don't find any?"

CHAPTER IX

TOM BURTON was right. No 'cloos', and so many blunt instruments lying around that it made the detectives dizzy just to wonder about them. Not one was marked in any way to suggest that it may have been used as a cosh, either. Their time was not wasted, however. Measurements were taken relating to the positions of cabins, the galley, the engine-room, the gangway leading to the wheelhouse, and the upper deck in relation to the after-hatchway, after-deck and stern locker. Times were recorded of how long it took Tom to reach these various points at varying speeds. The cabins were paid particular attention, especially the one occupied by the Gordonis. Even the upper deck planking on the portside came in for a close inspection with Nichols down on his knees with a magnifying-glass searching for scratch marks such as a desperate cat might make to save herself from falling overboard.

There were none.

The whole boat was as innocent and shipshape as constant care could make it.

At last, the inspector stood still and shook his head.

"This is a tough nut, Tom."

"Weren't we the clever little detectives?" Tom shook his head companionably. "We couldn't even find where Pussy went over."

Nichols looked thoughtful.

"And we should have, Tom," he said slowly. "It might point definitely to her being dropped, do you think?"

Tom nodded.

"Looks like it. Pussy would surely clutch at something if she felt herself hovering over the drink. Do we take it, then, that she was dropped with some deep and dark design behind it?"

The inspector's head turned towards the wheelhouse.

"It makes it a little more on the premeditated side if Pussy *was* induced to set up a howl to divert Carter's attention, mmm?"

"Aha!" Tom agreed, helpfully. "Then all we've got to do . . ."

The inspector threw up a despondent hand.

"Don't go any further! I know. All we've got to do is find out who. Come on then," he sighed. "A few more words with each of our customers individually seems indicated now that we've had a view of the scene of the crime, more or less." He lifted his voice. "Jones—see that nobody—repeat, nobody—comes aboard. No matter who, or why, without my say-so."

"Right, sir."

The inspector and Tom left Jones patrolling the decks in a way that boded ill for anyone or anything approaching them, and wound their way up the path to the house.

As they entered the living-room from the patio, Inspector Nichols stood for a moment to gaze around incredulously.

"I can't see how crimes come to be committed in surroundings like these, Tom," he observed.

Tom wagged his head comically in reply.

"Human nature, my friend, always has a habit of rolling up even in the best regulated circles. You've been reading too much Kitchen Sink stuff lately. Cur-rime doesn't always consort with the cockroaches, you know. The silkworms are absolutely *riddled* with it!"

Trevor Nichols screwed up his eyes, as if in pain while Tom smiled with self-satisfaction.

"Not bad, eh?"

"Too much sun. Better sit down and take it quietly for a while!" Nichols prescribed, taking his own advice and choosing the most comfortable chair.

Tom chuckled, and pulled out his pad and pencil.

"Oh, before you do sit down, you might tell Corbett to bring Mr. Carter back to the slaughter," said the inspector.

Dutifully, Tom went to the door, opened it, had a word with Corbett who was standing outside like a modern Atlas braced to defy the world, then waited, muttering in sad tones, "Trouble with some people is they've got no culture."

He timed his remark to coincide with Stephen Carter's entrance so Nichols had no chance to retaliate. Instead, he rose with his pleasant smile as the older man approached him and indicated the easy chair which he had drawn up to face the window. He liked the light on people's faces. Old-fashioned stuff, of course, as Tom had told him many times, but it was still useful sometimes.

Tom settled himself in a chair well in the background and prepared to take notes behind his hat as before.

"Sorry to have to keep on bothering you," Nichols was saying to Carter, "but as the corpse wasn't lying where it was found, my usual procedure has had to be altered to fit the case."

"I quite understand." Carter seated himself with a sigh.

"Had lunch?"

"Nobody seemed very hungry," was the short reply.

"Suppose not. Smoke?" The inspector offered Stephen a cigarette.

"I don't use them, thanks."

Nichols smiled and put the packet of cigarettes away.

"Neither do I. Bad for the wind. Especially for swimming. Just keep them for social occasions. I noticed you've got some underwater gear on the boat. Do any underwater swimming yourself?" he asked conversationally.

"Only with a mask. Haven't tried an aqualung or any of that gear, yet." Carter spoke quite casually, evidently seeing no great importance in the question.

The inspector replied as casually, "We'll have to introduce

you to it one of these days. Now, about this nasty business. We'll have to—"

"I can't believe it was murder!" Carter interrupted suddenly. "Who had any reason to do a thing like that? Whv, the man hadn't been in the country for more than a few days."

"Somebody got to know him well enough in that time to want him out of this world," the inspector pointed out.

Carter didn't answer. Nor did he look at the inspector. Instead, his eyes turned to His View which he could see from where the inspector had placed him, and he sighed deeply.

"Would you mind giving me Gordoni's background?" Trevor Nichols continued. "All you know about him, that is?"

Carter answered quietly and distinctly as if he were repeating a lesson.

"I hadn't met him before he came out here. I knew he was the son and heir to the Gordoni Automobile Manufacturing Company of Turin, Italy—nothing more. His wife's name is Tina and, as far as I know, he came out to Australia aboard the *Ventura* on a holiday trip. I invited them both to join this house-party for the week-end from hospitality. Not a desire to murder either one of them. Neither of the Gordonis had met my wife and daughter before, either. And neither my wife nor daughter had the slightest cause to murder Marco."

As no reply was forthcoming to this speech, Carter withdrew his eyes from the view and swung them around to find the inspector regarding him thoughtfully.

"Well?" he queried. "Don't you believe me?"

The inspector smiled.

"Mr. Carter, you are the first person I've questioned so far. And I'm not paid to believe in anything but facts. So have you any to offer me?"

Carter answered with a faint smile of his own.

"Sorry. Bit touchy. No. I haven't any real facts for you."

"Right. Then let's go over the sequence of events just as a check. Correct me if I'm wrong, will you?" He fished in his pocket for a paper Tom had prepared for him earlier and

read: "Cat found in water, portside. Miss Carter and Mr. Bowers came on board. Miss Carter dived in, followed by Bowers. Cat rescued. Miss Carter returned on board immediately. Bowers swims to stern of boat and finds the body. He calls for help. You go down to him. Gordoni is discovered. You, Field and Bowers haul him aboard. Mrs. Field joins you on deck. A few seconds later, Mrs. Kelleher comes aboard, followed closely by Kelleher and Harris. Mrs. Kelleher has hysterics at sight of Gordoni. Kelleher knocks her out and takes her below accompanied by Mrs. Field. You send Miss Carter to call Mrs. Carter from the water. Harris and Field carry Gordoni below. Later, Mrs. Carter and Mrs. Gordoni return with Miss Carter. You tell them what has happened, then head for home. Have I missed anything? Oh, yes. What became of Bowers?"

Carter, a trifle dazed by this rapid-fire condensation of events, jerked out, "Eh? Oh, Bowers? He felt sick so we left him on the stern locker. As far as I know he stayed there until we got back home."

"When was it that you realised that Gordoni had been killed?" was the next seemingly innocuous question.

Stephen Carter considered for a moment.

"I think it was just after Nancy had joined us that we noticed—" He was suddenly very still. Then he continued quietly, "but . . . killed? We didn't know he'd been killed then. All we knew was that he was dead, Inspector."

Nichols allowed his tensed muscles to relax slowly.

"Of course," he said smoothly. "Er—how long have you employed the Fields, by the way?"

"Mmm?" Carter started at the sudden switch. "Why—they've been with us since the end of the war."

"Trustworthy?"

"Absolutely!" was the emphatic reply. "George and I were in a Jap P.O.W. camp together. I regard him as a friend rather than as an employee, Inspector. *And* his wife. I hope you'll treat them accordingly."

The inspector's lop-sided smile answered him.

"There's only one person I treat differently from any other,

Mr. Carter, and that's the guilty party. Otherwise I'm not at all class conscious. Er—have you thought of anything else you can tell me now that might help?"

"No," Stephen replied shortly. "Just one thing I'd like to ask. Do you cable Gordoni's parents, or do I?"

"Oh, you might do that but—er—I'll have to see the draft before you send it. The C.I.B. will be sending an official one as well, of course . . . and you'll have to face up to a visitation from the Press. You realise that?"

"Hell!" Stephen frowned. "I hadn't thought about that. Can't you do something?"

"I shan't let them into the grounds until I've finished my investigation, but the harbour is neutral territory. They'll be swarming around in boats, I'm afraid."

"If any of those bloodsuckers set foot on my yacht . . .!" Stephen breathed fire.

"I've left Jones on board," the inspector reassured him. "He won't stand any nonsense and I'll have a man with his dog about tonight."

"I see." Carter grimaced with distaste. "Just like an armed camp, in fact."

"Just to keep anybody from confusing issues if they feel so inclined."

Carter gave the inspector a questioning look but Nichols changed the subject completely instead of answering it.

"Anybody at the motor works have a grudge against Gordoni that you know of?"

"Mmm? Grudge? Of course not."

"That you know of?"

Stephen's glance hardened, then he nodded grimly.

"Right again, Inspector. That I know of."

"Well, that's all for now I think, thanks. Until I unravel a bit more, at any rate."

"I sincerely hope you unravel something! I want this off my plate just as soon as you like."

"Who doesn't? Would you mind asking Mr. Kelleher to step in now, please?"

The inspector nodded a pleasant dismissal as Tom opened

the door, and Stephen Carter walked out frowningly, displeased with himself and the impression he felt he had given of an absent-minded half-wit. That young inspector had run rings around him, Stephen grunted to himself as he opened the door of the dining-room where the rest of the house-party was sitting around the remains of the unwanted luncheon.

"John," he said, "the inspector wants a word with you."

Kelleher muttered a stifled oath and heaved himself to his feet.

"What's he want with me? I didn't find Gordoni."

Carter shrugged.

"We'll all have to go through it, John. Better get it over."

"Bloody hell!"

Disregarding Joyce Carter's suddenly lifted head at his forthright expletive, Kelleher stamped across and slammed out of the room.

CHAPTER X

WHEN JOHN KELLEHER entered the living-room, the inspector was reminded of a steer suddenly let out of a paddock—head lowered, suspicious, watchful—and he allowed himself to slump still further into his chair in a half-somnolent attitude but his eyes were sharp and alert under their drooping lids as he motioned the other man to take the chair.

"Wife feeling better, Mr. Kelleher?" he asked politely.

Kelleher made himself comfortable before replying.

"She'll be all right. Just a touch of nerves."

"Natural enough," Nichols nodded agreeably. "Well—let's get down to business. You are the assistant general manager for the Gordoni Works, right?"

"Right."

"How long have you been with them?"

"Since just after the war—when they started up out here."

"Oh, I see. It's not an old-established firm, then?"

"Not in Aussie it isn't. Been in the family in Italy for years but Gordoni didn't come out here till after the war when our chaps had the stuffing knocked out of 'em—business-wise."

"Were you in it?"

"The war? Yair. Wavy Navy, mc. Salvaging the junk the Nips sent to the bottom in Darwin. Some job!"

"Salvaging, eh? You must have done quite a lot of underwater work, then?"

"Some!"

"I do some gadding about below myself," Trevor smiled companionably at Kelleher who didn't smile back, "but only for fish and fun. Bit different from your lot, but I guess you had some fun, at that?"

"We had our moments. Suit diving mostly."

"Oh yes? I suppose the aqualung wasn't any too practical for long hours of work. You've done some skin diving since, though, I suppose?" Trevor asked casually.

"Who hasn't?"

"How right you are! We'll be having traffic lights down there soon," Trevor smiled again. "But this isn't getting us any further with the job in hand, so give me your version of what happened when Gordoni was found, will you? No—on second thoughts, tell me what you did from the time you arrived here for the week-end."

"Stone the crows! Where d'you want me to start?"

"Well, how about from the time you left home Saturday morning?"

"——! You want jam on it, don't you?" was the vulgar reply. "All right—I picked up the Gordonis from the 'Australia' Hotel and brought 'em over here. Then we got on the boat an' took off for a swim."

"Where?"

"Manly Pool. Steve didn't want sharks messin' up the V.I.P., I guess, so we stayed strictly behind the nets." Kelleher's voice slurred with his contempt for all 'play-safers'.

The inspector knew the type only too well. He'd had to save more than one from the results of their folly when he belonged to the Lifesavers on the beach. Still, no doubt Kelleher could cope with any difficulty he might get into after underwater salvaging in North Australian seas. Every kind of hazard could be expected there in the course of a day's work so perhaps swimming behind nets *would* seem tame to him. Nichols, therefore, contented himself with prompting, "No incidents?"

"No. We just had a swim then came back here to change. Then we went in to Romano's for one o' their nightly scrambles"

The inspector's lips twitched. Nightly scrambles? Romano's was one of *the* places to dine and dance in Sydney. Expensive enough to qualify for a higher derivation than a 'nightly scramble', surely? Kelleher, evidently, was also a man who believed in belittling all things elegant. Probably preferred a night out drinking and playing poker with the boys in his shirt-sleeves to anything else. The inspector wondered what Mrs. Kelleher preferred doing. She looked more the dinner and dance type, and his interest quickened. Had the Italian provided the . . .? He paused. But Gordoni had only been in Australia for two days. Still—it was a thought to be tucked away.

"No incidents?" he asked again.

"Not that I noticed. Went home early though."

"Any reason?"

"Didn't seem to be. Joyce just ups and says, 'Early night. Long day tomorrow,' or something of that sort, and off we went. Suited me. I was dogged! Had a heavy week."

"Mmm. You don't mention Mr. Harris. Was he in the party all this time? Or did he join you on Sunday?"

"Oh, no. He was there—if anyone noticed him," Kelleher sneered.

"Not a social success, you mean?"

"Old Maid," grunted Kelleher. "Rides a push-bike everywhere to save on petrol," he went on full of disgust for such peculiar behaviour. "You'd think we weren't paying him top salary."

"Bachelor?" asked Trevor.

"Yair. Even does his own cookin'! Married to his bloody ledgers if you ask me. Tries to put the damper on *our* expenses too, Steve's and mine! You'd think it was his own money."

"Good at his job though, eh?"

"Just a bloody wizard with figures, that's all," Kelleher admitted begrudgingly.

"So you came back to the house after Romano's. What then?"

"I went to bed. Don't know what anyone else did, except the wife stayed down for a coffee so I suppose the others did

too. Don't know what time she came up. Passed out as soon as the head hit the sack."

One over the eight, guessed Nichols. Aloud he said, "And next day?"

"All had breakfast in bed, then took off for Balmoral."

"That covers quite a bit of time, Mr. Kelleher," Nichols remarked. "Did nothing out of the ordinary happen all the time you were sailing down the harbour?"

Kelleher shook his head.

"I dunno what you're lookin' for but I didn't notice anything out o' the ordinary."

Sensitive type! Wouldn't notice an earthquake under his feet, probably, thought Nichols, rapidly losing hope of discovering anything vital from this source.

"Go on."

"Well, we all hopped in for a dip first thing—except Steve, that is. He stayed with the boat."

"Did you come out of the water at all?"

"Uh-h-h . . . out? Er—yes. I came out once with Gordoni, as a matter of fact, for a smoke-o, if that's what you mean. We had a drink with Steve, chewed the rag a bit, then in we went again. He was all right when I left him a bit later."

"What did you talk about? Business?"

"Hell, no! Couldn't tie Gordoni down to that in the office, let alone out of it. No, we talked about the prices of drinks in his country and ours, I think. Things like that. Nothing much."

"Just the three of you on board all this time?"

"As far as I know. May've been somebody else about. The Fields'd be there somewhere. They never take to the water."

"Never?"

"Not that I've noticed."

"Did Mr. Carter leave you alone with Gordoni at any time?"

Kelleher thought for a moment or two.

"He went off to pull in the anchor chain once, I seem to remember," he said at last.

"You and Gordoni still talk about nothing much while he was gone?"

Kelleher gave an impatient laugh.

"Hey, you're coming it a bit strong, aren't you? How do you expect a man to remember what he talked about hours back?"

"I just wondered if you might have asked him why he'd come to Australia."

"Tried to get that out of him at the office more'n once, don't you worry," Kelleher grunted. "Like pushin' jelly about—which makes me think we weren't far wrong. Well . . . we won't know now, will we?"

"Know much about Gordoni himself?" Nichols shifted his course.

"The wife and I went to Italy last year. He and his father gave us the old V.I.P. while we were in Turin. Looked after us real well. Apart from that—well, he's not much my type. Give me a good old Aussie every time."

"I see. Nothing definite against him but his nationality, eh?"

"That's right. Aussies'll do me. Carter should have gone by rights. Senior to me. But something came up and he was needed here so the wife and I had to go and mix with the I-ties instead."

"And you didn't see or hear anything on board the *Sea Spray* which might help us find out why Gordoni was killed?"

"Not a thing. First I knew was seeing him lying there on the deck—dead as mutton."

The inspector looked up sharply. 'Dead as mutton' was hardly the thing to say under the circumstances, surely? Almost a certain relish about it. No sign of it on Kelleher's face, however, and Nichols had to put it down to the general coarseness of the man. Hearty and coarse and didn't like foreigners. Probably started out as the perfect salesman for the men of the Bush who bought his cars and liked a filthy yarn over a beer or two while they were doing it. He must have been a great success with them. Probably why he held his current job. But . . . did Mrs. Kelleher appreciate these qualities?

"Mmm," said the inspector aloud. "Well, thanks for your co-operation, Mr. Kelleher. That'll be all for now."

"Okay." Kelleher rose to his feet but kept his eyes warily on the inspector. "Do you want us to stay on here for a bit?"

"I'll be able to tell you that later in the day."

"Okay. We'll be around."

Kelleher waved a hand and turned to leave the room.

"Oh, Mr. Kelleher," the inspector's voice stopped him. "You didn't ask how Gordoni was killed?"

"Drowned, wasn't he?" asked Kelleher in a wooden voice.

"Yes—but knocked unconscious and then held under for the required length of time."

Kelleher whistled shrewdly.

"Somebody made sure of it, didn't they?"

"They did, indeed, so—if you can think of anything that might help us to find out who it was you might let us know?"

"Look, Dig, I'm no stool pigeon. You do your own dirty work, see?"

With a final glare to emphasise his words, Kelleher then walked on out of the room.

Watching him go, Trevor murmured, "I'd like to know just what we've got there, Tom."

"*Crime passionnel*, as the French say," was Tom's reply. "He's still my bet. Especially with the sex-plus Mrs. K. on his hands."

"Oh? I thought you favoured Miss Carter for the highest honours?" Trevor remarked casually.

"Oh, I do! But my radar still picks up other signals, boy," Tom assured him. "What Mrs. K's like when she's not heart-broken—wow! No wonder Kelleher watches her like a hawk."

"Mmm, well, bring her in for questioning," grimaced the inspector.

"Softie!" snorted Tom. "She might be the reason for the Bikini Boy's sudden demise. Thought of that?"

"I try to think of everything," was the calm reply. "And just to show how soft I am, you'd better give Corbett the high sign to deal with Kelleher. He might want to watch over the little woman in case she says something out of turn. After

all, he clocked her soon enough when she was having hysterics and it *might* have been to stop her talking."

Tom winked at him.

"I'll organise it."

He went out, closing the door behind him. When he came back a few moments later, his hand was placed solicitously under the elbow of Betty Kelleher and he was talking to her reassuringly as he ushered her into the room.

"Here's Mrs. Kelleher, Inspector. I told her you'd only keep her a moment." He winked again over her head to indicate that her husband was being held at bay outside, and the inspector stood up and held out his hand sympathetically.

"Mrs. Kelleher, this is good of you. Sit down. I hope you're feeling better?"

"Ye-es, thank you. It . . . was the shock and . . . everything." Her eyes, which would normally hold a 'come-to-bed' look, Nichols guessed, were full of suffering as they met his and he felt sorry for her, suddenly.

"Of course, of course," he said, soothingly, seating himself after she had been settled in the chair. "But you understand that I've got to have everybody's statement in a case like this? I've only a couple of questions to ask you, but they'll help me form a better picture of what happened this morning, I hope."

"But, nothing happened, Inspector. Nothing!" she replied, earnestly. "Nothing that could possibly account for—" Her voice broke on a sob which she struggled desperately to control.

The inspector waited for a moment, then he said quietly, "You had met Gordoni before—in Italy, I believe?"

He noticed that her hands gripped each other convulsively before she answered, "Yes."

"You—liked him?"

She stiffened and looked fixedly down at the carpet.

"Yes," she admitted, stiffly.

"Nothing more?"

No answer.

"You were very upset by his death, Mrs. Kelleher," Nichols

tried again, but very gently. "First hysterics and then a faint—yet you are a healthy-looking woman."

No answer, but the tightly clenched hands went white and she seemed to shrink in the chair.

"Were you in love with him, Mrs. Kelleher?"

This forced a gasp out of her but nothing more.

"I'm sorry to add to your distress like this," the inspector continued. "I'm only asking such questions so that I can find out who killed Marco Gordoni if it is humanly possible. Can't you help me at all? You must know that anything you say to me need not be made public unless—"

"Oh, stop!" she broke in abruptly. "Don't go on. I loved him. Of course I loved him!" she moaned. "And he's—dead. Don't you understand? Dead—and I c-can't b-bear it!"

Quickly, the inspector leaned forward and took her hands in a tight grip.

"Steady. Steady, Mrs. Kelleher," he said. "It's all right now. Don't cry. I won't worry you any more now. I just had to be sure. It's all right."

He could almost feel the woman's suffering through his hands. Whatever he had been, Marco Gordoni must have had something about him that women could love. There was his wife, Mrs. Kelleher—and how many more in this house-party had felt its effect, he wondered? Susan Carter, for instance? Mrs. Carter? He revolted away from the thought that either of these two could have felt the slightest interest in Gordoni. But, for all that, he had to take it into his calculations.

He waited until the hands he still gripped so tightly had ceased their painful shuddering, then he said gently, "What you have told me will go no further than this room, rest assured. And that will be all for the moment, Mrs. Kelleher."

A faint gleam of gratitude stirred in her eyes before she rose out of her chair like a woman lost in a trance.

Tom sprang up to assist her but it was doubtful if she even saw him beside her. When he opened the door for her, Corbett and her husband were seen out in the hall facing each other like two bulldogs.

At the sound of the door opening, however, Kelleher transferred his glare from Corbett to the inspector as he almost snatched his wife's arm away from Tom, but as nobody made a move or said a word to him, he fidgeted uneasily for a moment, then led his wife away in silence.

When the two were out of earshot, Tom looked lugubriously over his shoulder at his superior officer.

"I don't think he likes you," he said.

"I don't like myself sometimes," was the curt reply. "Mrs. Carter next."

"Oke."

Tom Burton forbore to carry the conversation any further—to claim that his guess about Mrs. Kelleher and Gordoni had been correct, after all. When Trevor went 'all stern and silent', as he put it, it was time to tread gently, so he merely gave Corbett his instructions and waited for Mrs. Carter to appear.

The inspector, however, knowing what was going on in his assistant's mind, crooked a sour smile at him.

"All right," he said. "I know what you're thinking. Husband Betrayed equals Murdered Lover. But—did Husband Betrayed know about it?"

"Why wouldn't he? He might be bone from the eyebrows up but even *he* couldn't miss it with her carrying on like a prima donna now that the bloke's dead." Then Tom shrugged woefully. "But Chiefee-boy isn't going to take our word for it, is he? He'll want a nice lot of watertight proofs before he offers anybody the hospitality of the Government."

"Your resignation would be thankfully received," Nichols groaned. "That's all I needed—to be reminded of that! Ah, Mrs. Carter . . ." He rose with a smile as Joyce came through the doorway. "Will you sit here, please?"

"Thank you, Inspector," she replied composedly, seating herself and at the same time watching the inspector as he relaxed easily into the chair opposite. She thought of all the preconceived ideas she had cherished about detectives and smiled, although she had felt far from smiling a moment before.

Inspector Nichols must have looked surprised for she hastened to explain.

"I'm not treating this affair lightly, Inspector. Don't think that. It was just that you've ruined my future crime-novel reading with one fell blow. I shall never believe in the larger-than-life detective again."

He gave her a puzzled smile which won her further approval. Nice young man, she thought. Not too conscious of himself and his undeniable charm. But, she reminded herself, he was a detective investigating a murder in her own house, a thought that was, even yet, unthinkable. She still had the unreal feeling that it was all happening to someone else. It *must* be! At this stage, she became aware of the detective's eyes observing her closely and realised that she had been silent for quite a while.

"Sorry," she said, with a start. "I was wool-gathering. I'm not used to this sort of thing. It's put me right out of step." She gave him an apologetic smile that was gone almost as quickly as it had appeared. "But I'll do my best to help. You can rely on that. What do you want me to do?"

"Just answer a few questions for the time being, Mrs. Carter. I'm still very much out of step myself."

"I'll do what I can."

Nichols leaned forward in his chair and attacked immediately. "Mrs. Carter, if you can think of any emotional upsets that occurred while Gordoni and his wife were in your company—anything unusual—please tell me. Nothing will go further than this room unless it is absolutely necessary."

"Emotional!"

Considerably startled by the unexpectedness of the inspector's words, Joyce Carter just sat there and blinked at him.

"It might not have anything to do with the murder," he went on quickly, "but I want to know about it. It couldn't have been all sweetness and light or someone wouldn't have killed Gordoni."

She winced back into her chair.

"How can I think that anybody in this house would kill

someone deliberately? It must have been someone from outside, Inspector. It *must* have been."

The inspector shrugged.

"We'll check on that, of course. But first we must check here on the spot. Now—what about it?"

Looking down at her hands as they twined about each other in her lap, Joyce Carter thought of the many queer little things—even dangerous things in the light of recent events—that had happened over the week-end. But none of them . . . surely *none* of them . . . added up to murder?

While she was thinking thus, Nichols was sitting forward watching her keenly and he felt a thrill shoot through his chest as he interpreted her silence to mean a possible lead in the right direction. He felt rather than saw Tom Burton sit up with interest, too.

But Mrs. Carter remained silent until, finally, she looked up to say firmly, "Nothing was said or done in my presence that might suggest that murder would be the outcome of it. I can't honestly think so, Inspector."

If he was disappointed, Nichols did not allow it to show as, quietly and softly, he repeated, "All sweetness and light, then?"

Mrs. Carter's eyes wandered to the distant harbour.

"Inspector, the Gordons had been our guests for just one day and a half. We had never met them before. Now—"

"Correction, Mrs. Carter," Nichols broke in smoothly. "Your husband and Mr. Harris had met Gordoni at the office earlier in the week, and the Kellehers had met them in Italy last year."

Her eyes returned to his in stern rebuke.

"My husband knew so little about them that he didn't even know why they had come to Australia, Inspector. Perhaps if you could find out if there was any mystery about that you would find that it *was* all sweetness and light as far as we were concerned."

Tigress ready to fight for her own, eh? thought Nichols, forbearing to mention that her husband might have found out already. Instead, he disarmingly changed the subject.

"Tell me about this morning, then. Were you on the yacht at any time after your guests had gone swimming?"

Mrs. Carter waited for a moment to allow her claws to settle back and her emotions to channel themselves into this new line of questioning.

"No. When I go in for a swim, I swim until I've had enough. Then I come straight out and change and I don't go in again. I came out of the water this morning for the first time when Susan told me something serious had happened on board. I didn't notice until then that Tina and I were the only members of our party left in the water."

"Miss Carter didn't tell you what had happened then?"

"No. She just said would we both come back on board as Daddy wanted to return home straight away."

"I gather you didn't see much of the others even when they were in the water?"

"Inspector—how much do you see of anybody else when you are enjoying a swim? Besides, the pool at Balmoral is a good half-mile wide and it was well patronised today. Naturally I stayed with the Gordons as they were my guests, but when Marco went off by himself, I only had Tina to think about."

"I don't suppose you could give me any idea how long it was between the time Gordon—went off by himself, you say?—and when you were called out of the water?"

"I can only presume he went off by himself, Inspector," Mrs. Carter corrected herself. "I think the last time I really remember seeing him was when he tried a back dive from the ladder on the yacht. But after that . . . no, I don't remember. I'm sorry."

"A back dive off the ladder, eh?" Nichols murmured slowly.

"Yes. I remember thinking what a foolish thing to do with the net so close."

"Showing off to one of the ladies, I suppose?" Nichols went on smilingly.

"No-o-o. I think he, was all by himself now I come to remember."

"I see. And that was the last time you saw him?"

"I—think so—but I couldn't be sure."

"Mmm," Nichols sighed, wondering if that might not have been the last time *anybody* saw Gordoni—except his murderer. Suppose the hand that had planted those bruises on Gordoni's ankle had been responsible for that irresponsible back dive? A jab of excitement flickered through him. It could just be. It could just be! Worth looking into, anyway. But—not now. Not with Mrs. Carter's eyes considering him with such interest. Once again he changed the subject.

"How about Mrs. Gordoni? Will she be able to answer some questions, do you think?"

"Oh, Inspector! Must you? Today?"

"I know," he grimaced understandingly. "It's grim—but if she is well enough—it just must be done."

"Dear, oh dear!" The interest in the blue eyes darkened to outright disapproval. And when Nichols went on to say that he would like to question her daughter next, the tigress rose again.

Before she could speak, however, the inspector forestalled her with a twinkle in his eye.

"I really must, Mrs. Carter—but I promise not to use a thumbscrew."

Mrs. Carter was not amused.

"I would like to be here while she is questioned, Inspector."

The inspector shook his head.

"Sorry, Mrs. Carter. But, believe me, you have no cause to be alarmed. At this stage, my questions are purely routine—to the innocent, of course."

Joyce Carter eyed him thoughtfully for a few moments before standing up abruptly. He hastened to rise with her.

"Very well. It seems I have no choice. But please—if you can—leave Mrs. Gordoni alone until she is calmer."

"How is Mrs. Kelleher feeling now?" he countered blandly, to be rewarded by a swift, searching glance from those magnificent blue eyes. How like her daughter's, he sighed, before continuing with, "I take it she was more than a casual acquaintance to Gordoni?"

"Do you?" was all she said.

The inspector sighed with exasperation. "Too many people have mistaken ideas of loyalty to their friends!" he almost snapped. "This is murder, Mrs. Carter, and it looks very much as if one of these friends of yours is the murderer."

"I still think it was somebody we don't even know, Inspector. Why, it could be the Mafia—or any of those weird societies they have in Italy."

Here, he cocked a humorous eye at her.

"Oh, Mrs. Carter!"

"Well . . . ! I've known all these people for years, with the exception of Peter Bowers, and the idea of *him* murdering anybody . . . !"

"He's strong enough to have done it—and jealous, perhaps?"

"Tosh! He hasn't got the—" Mrs. Carter stopped abruptly.

"'Guts', were you going to say?" The inspector grinned suddenly, and was as suddenly serious. "Who's to say what anyone may do in a fit of, shall we say, hysteria?"

"I've never seen him hysterical once. Besides, he had nothing to get hysterical about as far as I know."

"We'll see," The inspector gave her a slight bow of dismissal. "Would you ask your daughter to come in, please?"

Mrs. Carter opened her mouth to speak, but one look at the inspector's firm jaw made her change her mind and, without another word, she turned and left the room with Tom Burton hurrying to open the door for her.

When she had gone, Trevor Nichols said casually, "Tom, go and see if Mrs. Gordoni can see us, will you?"

"Oh, I get it!" was the instant reply. "Now that the red-head comes on the scene I get pushed into the upper storey!"

"If you don't stand there talking so much you'll be back in plenty of time," Nichols crooked a dry smile at his assistant's indignant face.

"Ar-r-r!" snarled Tom, but vanishing in a flash.

CHAPTER XI

SUSAN CARTER came to the door to find the inspector standing, hands in pockets, gazing out over the lawn.

"Shall I come in, Inspector?" she asked from the threshold.

He swung round on the instant, smiling and indicating the chair.

"Please. Take a chair, will you?"

She seated herself, then looked up at him cautiously.

His smile broadened.

"I don't bite," he assured her, offering a cigarette.

"And I don't smoke, thanks," she replied, with a slight answering smile.

"Ah, that's something we have in common," he said with greater warmth than was strictly necessary. As soon as he had said it, he could have kicked himself for he noticed a distinct cooling in the eyes regarding him.

And, indeed, Susan felt an instant recoil within herself as she caught the glint, wholly masculine, wholly un-C.I.B.-like, in his eyes. Surely he wasn't going to try *that* old line to win her confidence, she wondered? A sense of disappointment struck still colder depths for some unknown reason. Somehow she had expected better things, but why she had expected them she could not have said.

Fortunately, he had noticed that frosty gleam in time to take up a more official attitude.

"Er—well, suppose we start with you giving me your im-

pressions of Gordoni's effect on the house-party, then?"
"His—effect?"

The question was sufficiently unexpected to take her mind off his initial approach and she wrinkled her brow over it.

"Yes. I'd like to get hold of the man's personality if I can. From a woman's angle."

"Oh! Well, the women liked him, of course, if that's what you mean?"

"All the women?" he cut in quickly.

"He was very good-looking, charming and flatteringly attentive," she assured him, without precisely answering his question. "I couldn't say how much the men liked him . . . apart from superficially, of course. They seemed to accept him . . . but then, of course, he was their boss's son, so . . ." she shrugged.

"Would you call him a philanderer as far as the women were concerned?"

She hesitated considerably, and he thought how attractive her considering hesitations were.

"I don't really know if I would, or not," she replied after a second or two. "Italians ~~are~~ ^{are} so—well, they can't help flirting with all women. It's their way of making us feel . . ." She gave a slight laugh. "Well, it's morale-building, if you know what I mean. It all depends on how the woman handles that sort of thing whether it's harmful or not, I should say."

Trevor Nichols smiled. That was better. Didn't sound as if *she* had gone overboard for the Italian, anyway. For one moment, he had imagined . . .

"That's a very profound statement," he said. "But I think I know what you mean." His grin faded as he continued. "How did his wife react to all this?"

Again the girl paused, then answered frankly. "I don't really know."

"I see. No outward upset, eh?"

She nodded.

"That's right."

"Anyone else show any signs of not liking his attentions to the ladies?"

Susan looked at him for a moment in silence, and Tom Burton chose that exact moment to come back into the room. He paused in the act of shutting the door to stare suspiciously at Nichols who, however, met his gaze imperturbably before turning back to Susan.

"You were going to say, Miss Carter?"

Tom relaxed at the strictly impersonal note in the inspector's voice and walked to his chair.

"Do you think he was killed because of—jealousy?" Susan countered by another question.

Nichols sat forward alertly. Was the girl's complexion just a shade paler than before?

"Some motive is always present when a man is murdered, Miss Carter," he said quietly, not wishing to startle her away from the thoughts which were so obviously worrying her. "I'm just trying to find one to fit this case."

With her eyes fixed on his like this it was becoming increasingly difficult for him to find anything, least of all the right questions to ask her. Only the presence of Tom, now sitting in his usual place taking notes, kept him at it.

"I'm afraid I can't help you," she was saying, withdrawing somewhat, and upsetting his train of thought still further. He felt as if he wanted to reach out to reassure her, to tell her that no matter if she had . . . ! What the hell was the matter with him anyway? He tried to pull himself together by fixing Susan Carter's blue eyes with a detectival glare.

Her reaction was pronounced.

"You can't expect me to say that I think one of our guests, let alone one of my parents, could be a murderer," she protested indignantly.

"No. Er—" How was it that Nature managed to do such wonderful things with red hair and blue eyes? He made another effort. "Er—then tell me what you did from the time the Gordonis got here."

Surprised at the apparent meekness with which he dodged away from her growing indignation, and a little disappointed again, Susan complied with his request somewhat abruptly.

"All right. They arrived just before lunch on Saturday

with the Kellehers who had picked them up at the 'Australia' We went down to the yacht after Peter and Mr. Harris arrived and—"

"Peter?" Nichols cut in, also abruptly. "Peter Bowers—your fiancé?"

Tom Burton's head lifted away from his notebook and he, too, waited interestedly for the girl's reply.

"No. Just a friend."

The inspector breathed out gratefully and heard Tom make a note of this important fact with a scratchy flourish before he continued with a weight lifted off his mind, "After he and Harris arrived, what then?"

"We all went on board and cruised around the harbour."

"With nothing happening that could cause the least alarm?"

"Not a thing."

"What did you all talk about during this cruise?"

"Why, the usual things, I suppose—Art, Continental films, I remember, places of interest around the harbour—that sort of thing."

"Sounds harmless enough. What then?"

"After lunch we went for a swim in the Manly Pool and . . ." Her voice trailed to a stop. Remembering the scene she had listened to beside that Pool, Susan felt her blood run cold. What if . . . ?

The inspector noticed a sudden widening of her eyes and his own narrowed sharply. He shot a warning glance at Tom whose surprised pen was lifted, poised for the next word from Susan which did not come. Tom quickly made a sign in his notebook which stood for 'Investigate more fully', and waited.

But Susan, having reached the decision by now to say nothing about the incident until she had discussed it with her parents, plunged, instead, into a recital of more general activities.

The inspector let her go on uninterrupted. His next question came when she got to the night club.

"Gordoni danced well, I suppose?" he asked.

"Yes," was the cautious reply.

"You danced with him several times?"

"Naturally. He was my father's guest, therefore he asked me several times."

"Is Mr. Bowers the jealous type?"

"There was no need for him to be jealous, Inspector."

"Was he, though?" he persisted.

"You'd better ask *him*."

"Perhaps you're right, but I wish you could tell me what happened in the Manly Pool on Saturday."

Her startled eyes flashed to his.

"I didn't say . . ." she stopped.

The inspector's exasperation got the better of him for a moment.

"Everybody in this house is so obsessed with fair play!" he burst out. "Mustn't tell tales! Give the other chap the benefit of the doubt!"

"Well, really, Inspector!" she retorted warmly. "What code do you live by?"

He opened his mouth to apologise for his outburst but changed his mind, saying instead, "The code of 'Thou shalt not kill', Miss Carter."

She went dead white and said no more.

After watching her for a moment, the inspector went on more gently.

"Can't you tell me about it?"

Considerably weakened by the shock of his words, she almost told him all about it, then slowly shook her head. She would never forgive herself if a word from her brought suspicion on to some innocent head.

"All right."

He rose to his feet. "We'll leave it at that for now, but please remember that any information which might lead to the solving of a crime must be given to the police or serious consequences may result." Then he smiled. "There, I've warned you, so think it over, mmm? I shall have to ask you about it again, of course."

Susan turned towards the door with a worried frown marring her brow.

Tom hastened to open it, but, once again that day, a

woman ignored his act of courtesy. He gazed after Susan and shook his head with a sigh.

"I'm slipping," he moaned dismally. "They all walk past me as if I'm not here!"

Nichols's voice recalled him to duty.

"What about Mrs. Gordoni?"

Tom shook his head again.

"Byebyes until tomorrow according to the housekeeper."

The inspector grunted.

"We've got the 'Australia' Hotel on our list now, too."

"And the Manly Pool," Tom nodded. "Funny how things come out although nobody actually mentions 'em."

"How true!" Nichols agreed. "Not that we've heard what happened there—yet. I suppose I should have done a bit of third degree stuff, mmm?"

Tom looked at him with horror.

"On the redhead?" he gasped. "Over my dead body you would! Anyway, she doesn't like you much as it is."

This was said with some satisfaction and the inspector became abrupt once again.

"If she knows something that might help us—

"Yair, yair, I know," Tom interrupted quickly. "The old thumbscrew. Well, let's hope she'll see the light before that and send a bit of the fair play stuff in *our* direction. Honestly, you'd think they wanted the killer to get off, wouldn't you, Trev?"

"They either know him and feel like that—or they're frightened of throwing the wrong person to the wolves by careless talk. Either way, it's getting to be a damn menace! So let's have Mr. Warren Harris in, Tom. I'm getting tired of sitting around here asking questions nobody'll answer."

Tom clapped a hand to his head.

"I must be going mad!" he exclaimed. "Do you know I'd forgotten all about him?"

And off he went on the instant.

The fact that Mr. Warren Harris was continually being overlooked did not surprise the inspector in the least. A colourless character, he brooded to himself. A bachelor and

an old maid into the bargain. Bit too prim around the mouth, too, he decided as Mr. Harris stepped quietly into the room and took the seat indicated without a word. Neat, well-creased slacks, glistening white shirt with a Paisley scarf looped like a cravat at the open neck, carefully blended colours in his tweed jacket, grey hair well-brushed and shining. The inspector couldn't for the life of him imagine such a man ever being younger than he was now—and what would that be? About fifty? Couldn't tell. Probably look the same at seventy.

"Well, Mr. Harris—Warren Harris, isn't it?"

"That's correct."

Prim-voiced, too!

"You are the chief accountant for the Gordoni Works, aren't you?"

"Correct."

Talkative!

"For how long, Mr. Harris?"

"Four years. I had been the accountant prior to that for a further six years," was the precise reply.

"I see. And had you met Marco Gordoni in all that time?"

"No. I was never offered a trip to Italy, Inspector."

Just a slight emphasis on that 'I' caught the inspector's attention. Nothing to grasp, but—envious of Kelleher, perhaps? Worth watching.

"I see. You heard Mr. Kelleher say to me that he thought Gordoni had come out to Australia for some reason other than a holiday, I daresay?"

"Earlier, yes."

"Did you ever hear anything in the office to suggest that it might have something to do with the business?"

"I am concerned only with the accounting side, Inspector. The managers do not discuss other matters with me."

Which could mean anything, Nichols grunted to himself.

"Mmm," he said aloud. "Did you notice anything while he was in the house-party that might help us find his murderer, then?"

"No." Harris then appeared to make an effort to enlarge on

his abrupt reply. "Everything was in good taste and extremely well organised by Mrs. Carter, I thought."

Although the answer was just as far removed from the meaning behind his question as it could be, Nichols accepted it without comment and, being quite incapable of imagining this man disporting himself in the water, asked more out of facetiousness than anything else, "Go in for underwater swimming, Mr. Harris?"

He heard Tom cough suddenly in the background and then he noticed the utter stillness of the man in front of him and waited with some alertness for his reply.

After a moment, Harris must have sensed this for he looked up suddenly, put a hand to his head as if to ease a pain over his right eyebrow and said, "Oh! Sorry, Inspector. Did you ask me something? I was rather lost in thought."

"I asked if you ever did any underwater swimming?"

"No. No. I suffer with sinus, you see. Salt water isn't good for it. I have to be very careful—even when swimming on the surface."

"Bad luck," replied the inspector politely. "So you can't help us very much there?"

"Oh, if you want some information about underwater swimming, Inspector, I'm sure any of the others could help you. Kelleher is quite an authority, I'm told."

Once again there was that slight emphasis on the 'quite'. Was there bad feeling between Kelleher and Harris, then? But even if that was so, how could that possibly have anything to do with Gordoni? But talking about ill-feeling . . .

"Did you notice any ill-feeling for Gordoni from anybody on board the yacht at any time, Mr. Harris?"

The man considered.

"Ill-feeling? There was quite an argument on the subject of painting between young Bowers and Gordoni, but I hardly think that would establish grounds for murder. One imagines a greater degree of hatred to be necessary for such a deed."

The inspector blinked at this sudden spate of words, then said lazily, watching Harris from between half-closed eyes, "Or sudden rage, perhaps?"

But Harris's eyes remained hooded and expressionless.

"Or cold, calculated deliberation?" Nichols continued.

No movement or sound from the man opposite.

"Or any of a dozen other reasons," the inspector sighed and switched to a new direction. "You went swimming at Balmoral, however, Mr. Harris. Who were you with at that time?"

"With? I was by myself most of the time although I saw most of the others in passing several times, of course. But mostly—by myself."

"Yet you came aboard at last with Mr. and Mrs. Kelleher, I believe?"

"That is so. I met them at the steps, I think."

"Describe the scene that met your eyes when you got up on to the deck, will you?"

"The scene? Carter and the man, Field, were standing beside Gordoni who was lying on the deck. Oh, Mrs. Field was there, too. Bowers was sitting on the stern somewhere."

"What did you think had happened?"

"I think . . ." Harris said slowly. "I think my brain ceased to function after Carter said—the man was dead. It wasn't a sensation I wish to repeat, Inspector."

"Shock, I expect?"

"Yes."

"Nothing else?"

"What else was there to feel?"

"Mmm. Well—that'll do for the present, thank you. You'll stay on here for tonight at least, will you, please?"

Harris rose and nodded.

"If you say so, Inspector. Mr. Carter had already invited me before this—occurrence, so I daresay he will still be agreeable."

"He will," the inspector assured him. "I wonder if you would be kind enough to send Peter Bowers in next?"

"Certainly, Inspector."

Neatly, primly, Mr. Harris went out of the room.

"The water's getting deeper every minute, Tom," Nichols remarked. "When we've finished with the finder of dead bodies

let's get out on some action again . . . and breathe some fresh air, by gum! Even if it's only in the upper storey peering into the bedrooms and such."

• Tom Burton grimaced.

"That lovely, lovely job! Makes me feel like a Peeping Tom."

"Ooh!" winced the inspector.

"Ouch! No pun intended," Tom chuckled. "Just shows the state of my reflexes. All this chatter, that's what does it. Writer's cramp entering the brain. My notebook's full of guff, d'you know that? And Who Killed Cock Marco? Do we know? I ask you!"

"I'm beginning to . . ."

But Peter Bowers came into the room at that moment and what the inspector was beginning to do was lost as he recognised the Pose of the Day to be Nonchalance and acted with brisk precision in consequence, inviting the muscular young man, who should have been lean and hungry to have run true to that high-pitched voice of his, to sit down.

"I hope this won't take long," Bowers murmured, rejecting the whole sordid business with an airy flap of the hand. "An idea for a daub is simmering and I'd like to get down to it."

"Daub? Oh! Are you an artist, then?"

"I try to be," was the mock-modest reply.

"Make a living out of it?"

Bowers looked pained.

"Art is above monetary recompense."

"Oh!" Nichols replied, enlightened. "You have a private income, I presume?"

"If you must know," Bowers replied, reluctantly, "I slave for the Tunico Oil Company five days out of seven."

"Ah, well, now that that's cleared up, I'd like to ask you about last Saturday night."

Bowers was surprised.

"Saturday night?"

"Yes. Why were you jealous of Gordoni, for instance?"

The inspector believed in the value of surprise attack, and he was not disappointed.

Bowers sat up, and yelped, "Jealous? Who said I was jealous of Gordoni?" he barked indignantly. "Ye gods! The man was nothing but an ignoramus. Why, he actually *liked* Renaissance! Liked it! I told him what I thought of his taste in art and if you call that being jealous—!"

"I wasn't thinking about art, Mr. Bowers," the inspector cut in serenely.

His answer was a sudden glare from a pair of most in-artistic, earthy, wide-open eyes.

"I don't care what you were thinking about! The man was an utter moron . . . telling me I knew nothing about art when he knew damn-all about it himself! And when he started to dance cheek to cheek with Susan—well, that was the damn limit!"

The inspector felt a certain sympathy with this but he said nothing until Peter's sustained glare and smouldering silence suggested that Bowers had said all he was going to say. Perhaps he had realised the danger to himself in his previous words and was angry with Nichols for having caused him to say them. Nichols shrugged inwardly and obligingly changed the subject.

"You were the one to find Gordoni in the water, weren't you?" It was more of a statement than a question.

"I was—and if you think I put him there first you want your head examined!" Bowers went on glaring.

So the anger *was* directed to me, the detective mused before he continued smoothly, "You didn't, eh?"

"No, I didn't! And you can't prove that I did!"

"Mmm. What did he look like when you found him?"

"Look like?" Bowers faltered uncertainly. "Look like? He looked like a man jammed in amongst the propellor blades. How else would he look?" Bowers's skin had paled while he had been speaking and remembering. "I—I tried to pull him out by his hair," he went on, staring into space. "But I couldn't move him. I couldn't!"

"And what did you make of it all?"

"Make of it?" Bowers blinked. "I didn't stop to make anything of it. I wanted some air—and some help. I don't

know if you've ever been through the ordeal of finding a dead man under the water, Inspector, but, believe me, it takes a stronger stomach than I've got."

• "I see, and when you got that air and the help and had a second look at Gordoni, what did you think?"

Bowers paled still further.

"Good God, I was beyond thinking of anything by then. What do you think I'm made of?"

"Did you wonder how he came to be wound round that propellor, for instance? Whether it was by accident, or whether he had been deliberately pushed into it?"

"Pushed?" Bowers gulped.

"Didn't think of that, eh? Well, describe the position he was in for me in greater detail. Or, better still, as you're an artist, draw it, will you? Tom . . .?"

Tom, barely concealing a grin at the way the artist's most sensitive feelings were falling on barren ground, hurried up with pen and paper.

Hesitantly, Bowers took the pen and stared blankly at the paper for a while, then the two detectives saw an underwater scene grow before their eyes. A man's body embraced a propellor shaft, his head hung down between the blades and both Nichols and Tom Burton flinched as they realised what would have happened the instant the engines were started.

Bowers must have reached the same conclusion, for he shoved the drawing away from himself hurriedly and folded his arms over his stomach tightly as it heaved its protest.

Nichols looked down at the sketch admiringly.

"God!" gasped Bowers. "If I hadn't found him . . .!"

"Nobody would have, Mr. Bowers. This drawing is very good. And that's exactly as you found him?"

Bowers bent still further over his arms, saying nothing.

The inspector did not press the point.

"It will be very useful, thank you. File it, Tom."

Tom took the sketch, added it to others in his notebook and returned to his seat as Nichols continued.

"Now—let's get back to when you returned to the surface the first time, Mr. Bowers. What did you do?"

Peter Bowers straightened a little to groan at the stupidity of the police in asking the same questions over and over again, and his voice was long-suffering as he replied.

"I shouted for Mr. Carter. He came to the stern. George, too, and, somehow, we got Gordoni on board."

"And then?"

Bowers's impatience grew.

"Mr. Carter tried artificial respiration but—too late. Gordoni was turned over and then George found those scratches on his chest. That just about finished me. I can't tell you exactly what happened then. I was too busy trying to keep myself from passing out. I vaguely remember Mrs. Kelleher laughing her head off. That's all."

"I see. And you stayed where you were until the boat got back to Thorntree Point, I understand?"

"I don't know who could have told you that. I certainly couldn't have told you what anybody else was doing. I suppose I did just that—as far as I can remember."

"There is always somebody who notices what other people do, Mr. Bowers. You can't help us there, then?"

"About where everybody else was and what they were doing? Inspector, I had just found a dead man. I was in no state to *care* what anyone did."

"Mmm. Well, that's all I can think of for the moment. You will have to stay on here for a while though, if you will."

Bowers shrugged resignedly and rose to his feet.

"I might've known it! I can only hope the office will understand the necessity if this is going to take you all the week to ferret out."

The inspector did not reply, merely signalling to Tom to show the young man out.

When the door had closed as near to his heels as Tom could manage, Nichols remarked, "Useful characters to have around, artists, but a bit wearing. Have you got a plan of the house, by chance?"

"I'm glad you admit there's more than one artist about," Tom replied, handing over his notepad open at the sketch required.

"Just as long as you don't turn falsetto, your presence will be tolerated." Nichols became absorbed in the house plan.

Tom chuckled.

"If I had muscles like his, you wouldn't be game to tell me if I *did* turn falsetto."

"He does look strong, doesn't he?"

The eyes of the two detectives met, registered identical conclusions, then the inspector's eyes returned to the sketch he held in his hand.

"Right then. We'll do a search of this little lot . . . and interview the housekeeper and her hubby on the way."

Tom nodded wisely.

"The casual, accidental-meeting approach for them, eh? Oke. Let's go to it."

"Before we do—telephone base."

"This way, sir." Tom opened the door briskly only to meet the disapproving eye of the humourless Corbett staring stolidly back at him from the hall. Corbett did not approve of the free and easy way with which Nichols, Tom and The Team dealt with each other, The Boss should be treated with respect, he contended. Especially during working hours. Knowing this, Tom's face took on an owlsh expression and he endeavoured to look so unusually official that Nichols had to turn his head away while he dialled a certain well-known number.

When this was completed, however, he managed to face Tom as solemnly as the other young man was looking at him while Corbett glanced suspiciously from one to the other and they all waited for the answering voice from the other end of the line.

CHAPTER XII

AT LAST the phone vibrated and Inspector Nichols became as official as Tom Burton.

"Hello—Superintendent Gilmore?" he asked crisply. "Nichols here, sir . . . No. Still at the Carter house."

Short, sharp, snapping noises could be heard through the telephone to which Nichols answered, "Not an accident, sir. Murder."

The noises repeated themselves, shorter and sharper than before.

"I'll do my best, sir, and to that end I'd like to ask for a dog patrol for night watch. There's a large garden and a yacht involved. Anchored in Thorntree Bay. I don't want anybody getting aboard until I'm satisfied we've got everything we want out of it. Gordoni had a room at the 'Australia' Hotel, too. I'd like a man to give it the once-over."

More snapping noises. Incredulous noises, which Nichols answered with, "Correspondence, or something like that which might throw light on the reason for Gordoni being in Australia. There seems to be some worry on that score here. Love-letters might be a help."

Snap, snap.

"He was the type, sir, I believe . . . and we're a bit short on motive at the moment."

The snapping noises became loud and more derisive in tone.

Inspector Nichols went on quite smoothly, however.

"Gordoni Motor Works might repay a visit from one of our brighter ferrets with initiative, sir, if you could spare one. My team will be tied up here . . . Thank you, sir. He might be able to nose out something which has affected the higher grades on the staff—enough to cause murder. We have the manager, assistant manager and chief accountant here. They were all on board when it happened."

Snap, snap, snap.

"Yes, sir. I'm going cautiously. I haven't accused anybody, yet. Just questioning. You can rely on me, sir. I won't do anything rash until I get the facts." Nichols winked at Tom who winked back understandingly.

Snap, snap.

"I haven't got any definite idea about anything yet, sir," answered Nichols. "If we could just find out why Gordoni came to Australia in the first place . . ."

Snap, snap.

"But—nobody here seems to know for certain, sir. I was hoping one of the men you put on to the routine check might . . ."

Tom Burton, now standing near the inspector so that he could hear the snapping remarks quite clearly, split his face with a grin as he heard the answer to this.

"You've only asked for every spare man I've got, that's all! If you and they can't find out the answer to a simple question like that, I wash my hands of the pack of you! It's a wonder to me you didn't want a flock of divers to patrol the sea-bed at Balmoral as well!"

"Oh no, thank you, sir," was the calm reply. "We're going down ourselves tomorrow."

"What?" came an answering screech. "If you're thinking of enjoying yourselves during working hours floating around under the sea, you can damn well take it as leave!"

Nichols looked at Tom, then said into the phone with sweet reasonableness, "But we shall be on duty, sir."

"Like hell! Any excuse to put on that damned aqualung of yours! And what do you imagine you'll find down there now?"

"I'm not sure," Nichols said, thoughtfully. "Water doesn't help much where clues are concerned, so we must be grateful for anything at all."

Explosion!

Tom, still listening-in unashamedly, chuckled and began to beat time with his hands as the words he was expecting came clearly through the telephone.

"Don't forget I'll have nothing but facts. Reliable, concrete facts! Never mind all this stuff about anything being gratefully received."

Nichols and Tom shared a still wider grin and waited.

"I want facts—facts—facts! And you just get on with finding 'em or I'll have you back on the beat in Central Australia somewhere, two thousand miles away from the sea. Hear me?"

"Heard, and understood, sir."

"And don't drown yourself while you're doing it. This is going to hit the headlines hard enough as it is. I don't want to have to explain why my staff can go swimming during working hours as well. Any parasites there yet?"

"I saw a couple of cameramen outside the gates a while back, sir. That's why I want the dog. One of the reasons, anyway."

"The other being to protect you, I suppose!" was the sarcastic reply. "All right! You'll get your dog—and your ferrets where you want 'em. Make me a full report when you get back tonight and then don't bother me again until you've got it all wrapped up. And—you'd better do just that, d'you hear me?"

Slam!

Nichols, well-versed in the habits of his superior officer, had removed the receiver from his ear just in time and, patting it affectionately, replaced it softly and carefully back on the cradle.

"Boss's in good form," he remarked. "Let's be grateful he didn't order us to drown any reporters caught on the scene. Well, now—the house. Where's that skiff again?"

"In your pocket."

"Oh, well—let's start at the top and work down. How many rooms?"

"Bedrooms and bathrooms—six and two respectively."

"Come on, then. Objective, business correspondence, love-letters and/or blunt instruments."

Followed by a faint, disapproving sniff from Corbett the two young detectives mounted the stairs two at a time.

Behind them, the door to the dining-room where the house-party had congregated, closed softly after being open just a crack while the telephone conversation was in progress.

As the inspector's head swung around at Corbett's sniff, his eye caught the movement of the door. He pulled up short and Tom had to skip smartly aside to avoid colliding with him. Nichols held his arm to prevent the words tumbling from his surprised lips, and he was immediately on the alert.

Nichols beckoned and both detectives back-tracked down the stairs and across the hall. Quietly, Nichols opened the dining-room door and walked in. Without appearing to do so, he marked the position of all the people within in the split second before he spoke.

Three of them were standing up. Kelleher was bending over the open sideboard drawing forth a bottle of port. He paused in the act to look up questioningly when the inspector entered. Warren Harris was inspecting the view from the window. His head came around expressionlessly as the door opened. Bowers was eyeing a painting on the wall with all the sourness of a modernist faced with one of the Old Masters. He merely looked a little more sour when his eyes settled on Nichols.

The inspector sighed. Always there were three or more who could have been acting suspiciously. Did they do it on purpose? he wondered wryly. And Mr. Carter was sitting near enough to the door as well. Ah, well! Perhaps the superintendent had something after all with his fixation on facts.

"I just came to tell you that I shall have to take a look at all the rooms in the house before I go any further. It's just routine and as soon as it's been done you'll be free to move around again. Sorry it has to be done, but—inevitable I'm afraid."

"You must do as you see fit, Inspector," said Carter. But Mrs. Carter and Susan regarded him as if he were some species of toad, and his flesh crept with dismay. Why did he always have to place himself in such an unfavourable light all the time, he fumed helplessly? Especially with a girl like Susan! God, what he'd give to be just an ordinary suspect along with the rest just at this moment!

He pulled himself together.

"Yes. Shan't be long."

Abruptly, he shut the door and stalked upstairs with Tom, eyeing him curiously, tagging along behind.

In the same complete silence, the two young men went about a task they both hated, searching through other people's private belongings. Susan's room, in particular, set their teeth on edge. Nichols wondered if he could ever look her in the face again as he rifled through the piles of feminine underwear without, however, disturbing them by so much as an inch. And Tom, he noticed, was stepping about as if the floor had been strewn with eggs.

Both men breathed sighs of relief when they had finished there, and the fact that nothing incriminating had been found had little to do with it. If it came to that, nothing incriminating was found in any of the rooms, nothing that would account for Gordoni's sudden departure from this life.

And so they reached the last room of all—that occupied by Tina Gordoni.

Nancy Field opened the door to the inspector's knock.

"Ah, Mrs. Field, how is Mrs. Gordoni now?" he asked.

"Deep in a drugged sleep, Inspector. Poor thing! Just as well. What a dreadful thing to happen!"

"Yes, indeed. You know, by now, that we have reason to suppose that her husband was murdered, of course."

Nancy nodded.

"George told me. Dreadful! Not one of us, of course," she said with certainty. "Someone from one of those secret societies they have in Italy, most like," she went on, wisely. "Nasty things!"

"Did you see or hear anything that might have given you

an inkling that something unusual was happening on board?" Nancy's eyes widened.

"On board? It never happened on board?"

"Possibly."

"Dear, dear! But when—where . . .?"

"Ah, well, if we only knew that! We were hoping that you might have heard something . . . perhaps half an hour before you went on deck?"

Nancy gave this her thoughtful attention, then slowly shook her head.

"I don't remember anything unusual. Just people moving about from time to time."

"Well, would you mind going over what you'd been doing since the yacht anchored? Sometimes things you didn't register at the time have a habit of showing up when you browse over them with someone else."

"Goodness! I'll try then. Let me see. Lunch. Yes. I was preparing salads in the galley. The cat came in demanding *her* lunch, and I sent her packing till I had a spare minute. Then—"

"What time was that?" Nichols cut in quickly.

"The time?" Nancy Field snorted. "If I looked at my watch every time that cat came in for a meal—!"

"Yes, of course," Nichols smiled. "Silly of me to ask."

"Well, I'd tell you if I knew, Inspector. But, honestly!"

"Just go on then. Did you leave the galley at any time?"

"No. That I *do* know," Nancy replied, decidedly. "I was getting hotter and hotter down there, but with guests on board, I couldn't take a breather at all."

"Mmm. Nobody came down to see you?"

"Nobody, thank goodness. I like to get on with things on my own, you see. Not that I didn't think I was going to be invaded at one time, but whoever it was went off again into the main cabin."

"Oh?" The inspector lifted his eyebrows with assumed casualness. "Someone came down, did they? From the main cabin perhaps?"

Mrs. Field considered this and then said, "They must have

'cos I'd have heard the engine-room hatchway opening if they'd come in that way, wouldn't I? But I wasn't taking all that much notice, I suppose. Anyway, they went off and I couldn't tell you who they were or what they were doing."

"Surely you could see them if they passed the galley? There is no door to it, I believe?"

Mrs. Field thought again.

"Oh, I know what it was," she decided. "The curtain was pulled across to keep the flies away until I'd organised the lunch. I had everything out of the fridge, you see. Yes, it'd be the curtain."

"I see. Your husband might be able to tell us if anyone was about, I suppose?"

"Oh, sure to," answered Nancy. "If they went through the engine-room, at any rate. He was there putting the fishing tackle out."

"Good. We'll ask him about it. What then?"

"What then?" Nancy shrugged. "Nothing much then. A few footsteps sounded upon the deck, I suppose. And I heard voices now and again reminding me that lunch-time wasn't far enough off. No. It all seemed normal to me, Inspector. Just people enjoying themselves. And all the time . . . ! Dear, dear, what a dreadful thing!"

"And that's all you can tell us?"

"Until I heard somebody shouting for help and a bit of a commotion on deck, I had no idea! When I went up and saw the poor young man lying on the deck—what a turn it gave me!"

"You knew he was dead, then?"

"Not at first, I didn't. Not until George said so—and with all his war experience, you see, George would know."

"And everybody was shocked, eh?"

"Naturally!" Mrs. Field stared at the inspector with amazed disapproval. "Naturally!"

"Mmm," was all he replied, then his smile crooked itself at her. "And now I'm going to arouse your disapproval still further. I want to look through the belongings the Gordons brought with them for the week-end."

"While the poor soul is out of her senses?" she exclaimed, shocked to the core.

"Better than when she knows what's going on, isn't it?"

"It seems . . . underhand, somehow," Nancy replied reluctantly. "Are you sure you've got the right to do that?"

"Tom?" Nichols looked questioningly at his assistant.

Tom nodded.

"We're covered," he said, shortly.

Nichols turned back to the housekeeper.

"It must be done, Mrs. Field."

"Dear me!"

Nevertheless, she stood away from the door, howbeit reluctantly.

"Thanks," Nichols acknowledged briefly. "Will you wait out here, please?"

With that, he went quickly into the room with Tom following and shutting the door after him.

The inspector walked softly over the thick carpet to where Tina Gordoni was lying on the bed, quiet and relaxed. He stared down at her pityingly. So small and defenceless, she looked. Beautiful, too, in a dark Italian way. Fine bones. Delicate wrists.

Tom grunted uneasily at his elbow. "She wouldn't have the strength even to knock out a grown man like the Bikini Boy, let alone drown him."

Nichols nodded thoughtfully, then turned away in silence and went to work on the room smoothly and efficiently.

Result—nothing.

The two detectives paused to eye each other seriously.

"If he was killed for something he had with him, it's gone," said Nichols.

"There's still my Number One choice—Sex," Tom suggested.

"And there's still the Super waiting for his Facts. Don't forget that."

"What if we don't find any?"

"You give me the shivers! Come on—let's find George Field in the kitchen."

"Righto," Tom agreed. "Still got amnesia, I wonder? And if so—why?"

George, found feeding The Old Salt in the kitchen, proved to be just as unco-operative as ever. When asked about the person his wife had heard walking around the lower deck that morning, he replied that it had probably been the cat. When asked if the inner hatch had been open or closed, he said he couldn't remember.

Nichols looked hard at him.

"Did *you* go through to the cabins for any reason?"

"Don't remember," was the quiet reply.

"Did you kill Marco Gordoni?" was the equally quiet, almost conversational, question.

George Field's head shot up.

"What was that again?"

"You heard me quite well," Nichols replied evenly.

"No."

"No you didn't hear me?"

"No—I didn't kill Gordoni."

Nichols didn't move his eyes from George.

"Tom," he said, "see what you can find in here, will you?"

"Oke."

Not by a flicker of an eyelash did George betray emotion of any kind.

Tom went to work until there was not an inch of the kitchen he had not searched. The Old Salt was a much more interested spectator than either the inspector or George Field. They continued to watch each other expressionlessly—and neither got any good out of it.

"Field," said the inspector, at last, "when you saw that Gordoni was dead, did you know how he'd died?"

George paused cautiously before he answered slowly, "I knew he'd been drowned."

"Did you have a good look at him?"

"I turned him over on his back when I noticed a smudge of pink on the deck that looked like blood, if that's what you mean."

"That's how you knew he'd been murdered, then?"

"I knew he was *dead* as soon as they dragged him out of the water."

"Mmm. You were in Malaya during the war, weren't you?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Jap P.O.W. camp?"

"What about it?"

"You must have learned a thing or two about whether a man died by accident, or not?"

George sneered faintly.

"I knew if he had a bullet hole in him, or a knife slit."

Tom looked up from his searching and winced.

"But we didn't have many cases of drowning in the jungle," George continued. "They didn't take us down to the seaside for the odd week-end treat."

The inspector let that ride.

"And Mr. Carter was there with you, wasn't he?"

"He was." Cautious again.

"Great friends, weren't you?"

"Still are."

"Do anything for him, I daresay?"

"And him for me."

"That's what I thought. Well, that's all for now," Nichols said pleasantly, having caught a signal from Tom that he had finished and had found nothing. "Good day."

With that, he left George to an assortment of uneasy speculations, and headed for the main hallway.

Tom, caught by surprise himself, hurried after Nichols, flipping over another page of his notebook in readiness for more questions and answers.

"You won't need that any more today, Tom," Nichols told him. "I can't think of anything else to follow up until I get the reports in from the Doc, Jacko and the others. It's getting too late to go to Balmoral for a dive. That's for tomorrow morning, so we might as well get back to base ourselves and make out a report for the Super . . . and then out to Bondi for that blackfish. You tell the outside boys to stand by until relieved, will you, while I tell Carter that we're calling it a day?"

"Oh, my friend!" snorted Tom in disgust. "My friend!"

"Mmm?" innocently.

"Oh, my dear, dear friend! I didn't think I'd ever see the day when you'd pull your extra stripe to play a trick like that!"

"Like what?"

"So innocent! Worming yourself into a strategic position with the redhead and sending me off to do the outside work! Oh, very pretty! But—you wait. I'll have my revenge."

He strode out of the house to obey orders with a string of rare and beautiful Australian adjectives floating back behind him.

Nichols allowed the twinkle, carefully hidden until now, to show in his eyes as he watched his friend depart, then he strode off in his turn to find Stephen Carter . . . and, with any luck, to catch another glimpse of his daughter.

CHAPTER XIII

THAT NIGHT, after the C.I.B. had departed, the members of the Carter house-party were subdued and uneasy in each other's presence as was only natural under the circumstances. Eyes met eyes with speculation and suspicion in their depths. Those who knew themselves not to be guilty of murder acted as if they were out of sheer self-consciousness. Conversation was strictly utilitarian, with the presence of detectives in the hall and grounds laying a constraint even upon the Carters in their dealings with the Fields about domestic matters.

In fact, Stephen Carter, attempting to have a private word with George on several occasions only to be interrupted each time, finally gave up and followed his guests and his family upstairs for an early night and a little private conversation with his wife. Damn it, he hadn't had her alone for a private word since they'd had breakfast in bed that morning. That morning! Seemed like years ago, he gloomed as he stood at his bedroom window at last in dressing-gown and pyjamas, waiting for his wife to return from the bathroom. He glared out at the nightly transformation of His View into the black and silver reflection of light on shining water and thought only of the Alsatian out there on the prowl and the men on guard with him.

His jaw tightened. Reminiscent of that hell of a prison camp. After all these years! Would he never get it out of his system? he wondered. And what about George? Had *he* got

it out of his system? Or had this business brought it all back for him, too? That Jap . . . he couldn't forget that Jap George had . . . Stephen moved restlessly.

"What is it, darling?" asked his wife who had come back into the room unnoticed and who was now in the act of slipping between the sheets.

"Reminds me of the prison camp out there," replied Stephen without turning around.

"The last time you looked out of that window," she said slowly, "Marco Gordoni was alive. Very much so!"

Stephen looked around at her sharply.

"What made you remember that?" he asked.

"Remember? Could I ever forget? It was only last night . . . and I can't help wondering—awful as it may seem—if John saw what we did and—"

"What?" Stephen exclaimed with surprise. "Do you know, I hadn't even thought of that angle."

"Isn't that what's been worrying you?"

He stared back at her, considering whether to burden her with the thoughts that had nagged at him all day. They had never kept much from each other, he and Joyce. Nothing important, that is. Perhaps two heads would be better than one, after all. Anyway, he'd have no peace until he told her. He smiled faintly into his wife's blue eyes. Such soft, affectionate eyes yet with all the efficiency of a gimlet where he was concerned.

"Why can I never keep anything from you?" he asked.

"Because I love you, darling," she replied simply.

He moved over to sit on the bed and to bury his face in her neck, that softly perfumed refuge.

She held him close.

"What is it, sweetheart?" she crooned.

"It's a hell of a thing, hon," he said, at last. "A hell of a thing! But I'm scared to death it might have been George."

She jerked her head back to stare down at him.

"George?" she exclaimed incredulously. "You mean—who killed Marco? But why?"

"Well—I haven't told you, but it seems that Marco had

got hold of some new type of engine that could revolutionise the whole car industry. He wasn't going to give the Old Man a chance at it. Had the laudable intention of ruining him with it if he could just to prove what a clever little boy Marco could be if given the chance. Some damn fool reason, anyway. Of course, it would have ruined us as well. All our eggs in one basket! Let that be a lesson to me."

"What had you ever done to him that he should—?" Joyce began indignantly.

"I don't know why he was doing it, hon," he sighed. "Perhaps he didn't know we'd got so much money involved. It's probably the Old Man's fault, keeping him on a salary like any other employee. Anyway, there it is. We could've been ruined. In fact, the whole industry would have taken a knock. And the oil companies as well. That engine would only use a fraction of the ordinary type of fuel."

"Well, then . . ." Joyce exclaimed. "Don't you see? Anybody might have been spying on Gordoni if they'd known about it. Even—" She clutched her husband's shoulder suddenly. "Stephen, Peter Bowers works for an oil company!"

Stephen gazed at her in blank amazement.

"How your mind works is nothing short of miraculous! Peter Bowers—spy and murderer? You're crazy, hon. Really!"

"Why am I?" she demanded. "I don't think that's as crazy as you thinking it was George. Why, he hasn't got a thing to do with cars except to drive yours."

"I know . . . but you know how loyal he is. He'd do anything for either of us. You know that. I'm afraid if he thought something, or someone, was out to ruin me he'd set about eliminating double quick. And—he *does* know about the new engine business."

"How can he if it's such a hush-hush affair?"

"He told me about it. He happened to hear Tina and Marco talking about it in Italian and—"

"In Italian!" Joyce exclaimed. "Don't tell me George is a linguist as well as everything else about the place?"

"There was an Italian pearl fisherman in that Jap camp with us, hon. No papers and so on, so the Nips clapped him

in to be on the safe side. George picked up quite a bit of his lingo from him. Anyway, enough to be able to make out what Gordoni was up to."

"Well, I don't know!" Joyce marvelled. "It all sounds like some 'Penny Dreadful' if you ask me, and that doesn't make George a criminal, anyway."

Her husband smiled grimly.

"When he told me about it he offered to swipe the plan of the engine if I gave the word."

"Did Marco have it with him, then?"

"Apparently."

"Oh, the fool! And—did you?"

"What—swipe it? No. I hadn't got round to working out what I was going to do when . . ." He paused expressively.

"Where is the thing now, then?"

"Tina's got it, I suppose."

Joyce Carter bit her lip thoughtfully.

"Nancy told me the inspector went through all her belongings today."

Stephen sat up alertly.

"What for?"

"He searched the whole house, darling. Didn't you hear him say?"

"Yes, yes, but what was he looking for in Tina's room? Did he know about the plan?"

"He didn't happen to tell Nancy, darling," she replied dryly. "But I don't think he can have found it," she went on, consideringly.

"Why not?"

"Wouldn't he have been asking questions about it if he had?"

Stephen pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"Perhaps he would . . . if he'd known how significant it was."

"He appears to be a singularly competent young man. Have you asked George?"

Stephen answered absent-mindedly, "If he'd killed Gordoni? Yes, I have."

His wife was shocked.

"You asked George if he'd killed Gordoni? Straight out—just like that?"

"Isn't that what you meant?"

"Really! You men! Fancy asking him a thing like that! No, I meant if he'd swi—taken the plans. But what did he say about killing Gordoni?"

For the first time since the tragedy on board his yacht, Stephen Carter laughed.

"Oh, darling, you're wonderful! He said 'no'."

"Then don't be an idiot and worry yourself sick about something that isn't there. If George said—"

They were interrupted by a soft knocking on the door.

"Who is it?" called Stephen.

"It's me—Susan. May I come in?"

"Of course, darling," her mother replied, pushing Stephen away to make room for her daughter.

Susan came in carrying a wide-eyed, alert Old Salt in her arms.

"I had to bring her with me," Susan explained. "She doesn't understand why she mustn't go out tonight and she's been trying every window and door."

Joyce indicated her bed.

"There's room here for all four of us," she said. "What's the matter, pet? Can't you sleep either?"

Susan shook her head before shutting the door carefully and releasing The Old Salt, who leapt at once towards the windows. The wire screen to keep mosquitoes at bay brought her up short.

"Bro-oaw!" she wailed indignantly.

"Behave yourself," Susan admonished. "You're not going out to be chewed by any Alsatian and that's flat."

Switch, switch. An indignant tabby tail lashed with fury, but, as no one took any further notice of her, Puss soon saw the futility of this, sat herself down with her back to the people and stared inscrutably out into the night while Susan stared at her mother with serious blue eyes and wondered how to begin.

"Well, darling?" her mother asked softly.

"Do you want me to go away, Sue?" her father asked. "Women talk?"

"No, no. I want you both to hear this and to tell me what you think I should do."

"Of course, dear, if we can," her mother urged encouragingly.

"Well—it was down at the Manly Pool. Remember when we went swimming on Saturday morning? I was sun-bathing on a rock away from all the rest of you?"

"I remember. You'd had a tiff with Peter, I gathered," her mother replied.

"Yes . . . although I don't know how you knew."

Her father smiled wisely but said nothing.

"When a young girl lies by herself on a rock and a young man goes off for a long walk on his own . . . well, it's easy, darling. But, go on."

And Susan told her father and mother all she had heard at the Manly Pool.

"Now I don't know if I should tell the inspector," she concluded. "Or if it might throw suspicion on someone who really had nothing to do with—with . . ."

"Mmm," her father murmured thoughtfully.

But her mother was frankly angry.

"What fools those two were! They might just as well have written to their respective spouses and told 'em, point blank, that they were having an affair."

"Eh, eh!" Her husband sent a warning glance towards Susan.

"My dear, Susan is no longer a child—much as you would like to continue thinking so. Oh-h-h! Women can be such fools over men sometimes."

"Of course, it could've been a complete stranger listening there," Susan suggested hopefully. "But I was too embarrassed to think of facing anyone in those circumstances so I just stayed put and didn't dare even look to see who it was."

"I wish I could remember what everybody was doing that

morning. But . . ." Stephen shrugged, "there's a mile of beach there!"

Joyce nodded in sympathy. "I can't either, darling, so there's only one thing to be done—tell the inspector and let him sort it out. And about those plans, too, Steve."

"No, hon," Stephen protested emphatically. "If that gets out . . ."

"Listen, darling, we all know it couldn't have been one of us who killed Marco, don't we? We three, I mean—and the Fields, of course."

Stephen grimaced sheepishly.

"I *suppose* we do."

"Stephen! Well, then, it was either one of the others, or someone from outside who also knew about those plans."

"But what *are* these plans?" Susan cut in. "I haven't heard anything about them."

With that, her mother promptly told her as much as she knew about them with Stephen protesting every inch of the way.

"Wait a minute!" He finally managed to take the floor when his wife had finished with it. "Once you women get hold of a thing, there's no knowing where you're going to stop! I'll have to see if George's got them."

"I thought you said—" his wife began.

"I know I did . . . but I can't be sure for all that. And if they get into the wrong hands before we put them in a safe place . . . we're finished, hon. *Kaput!*"

"Rubbish! Besides—I have every confidence in that young inspector. He'll know exactly what should be done."

"He did seem very confident," Susan commented.

"And he has a very attractive smile, don't you think?" her mother asked instantly.

"Has he?" Susan asked, as if she had not noticed.

Joyce Carter glanced at her daughter more closely at this, then looked away with a slight smile and closed proceedings with, "Well, now that that's all decided, I think we should get a good night's sleep, so off you go, darling. Night, night—sleep tight."

The comforting words she had heard every night since she could remember, brought to Susan a feeling of stability and security as she kissed her mother and father, picked up the wriggling Old Salt and went off to her own room with a lighter heart.

Her mother watched her go, still smiling. When the door had closed behind her daughter, she said to Stephen, "How would you like a detective instead of an artist, darling?"

He did not reply.

She looked up at him in surprise, to see his face pale and set.

"Darling, what is it?"

"Do you realise—that if someone wanted those plans enough to kill Gordoni to get them—they might still be looking for them—if George took them first?"

"Well, I don't know! *You* accuse *me* of building bridges and you've said nothing but if—if—if since we came up to bed. For goodness' sake, stop trying to frighten me half to death, Stephen, and come to bed. I've had enough dramatics for one day. Besides, from what I've heard of George's doings in Malaya, I pity anyone who tackles him for anything . . . or you either, come to think of it. In fact—If I didn't have faith in you, I might be thinking *you'd* killed Marco."

Husband and wife looked into each other's eyes for a long time, then a faint twinkle reappeared in Stephen's to find an instant answering smile in the blue ones waiting for it.

"There!" she said. "Now come to bed and don't be silly."

He reached up obediently and switched out the light and soon his head was resting gratefully on his wife's shoulder. What a woman! But—what about that plan? Blast it! He'd simply *have* to find an opportunity to tackle George about it in the morning. If he had the thing they'd have to try and get it back somehow or George would be well and truly in the soup with that inspector on his back—whether he had removed Gordoni or not.

He sighed.

His wife's hand came up to caress his brow.

"Sleep on it, darling. Sleep on it."

Yes, that was it. Sleep on it. Sleep on . . .

Long after he had gone to sleep, his wife lay awake with her own thoughts and she, too, sighed many times as she relived some of the incidents of the past week-end. Just undercurrents—but they could have become so dangerous. Obviously had! And they had all been so happy just three days ago. Three days! Now . . . And that young inspector—so very young for the responsibility of sorting it out. Still, nobody, she was sure, got to be an Inspector in the C.I.B. without brains and ability. On that she must rest her hopes that everything would soon return to normal—and she meant normal! She tightened her arms around her sleeping husband's shoulders and snuggled down to sleep herself.

Tomorrow was another day. And there was always that young inspector . . .

While these thoughts were passing through Joyce Carter's head, a darker shadow was moving out of the shadows in her garden. It came from the direction of the garage and slid silently around the lawn keeping to the camouflage of the black and silver patterns the moon was spattering underneath the gum trees. Once across the garden, the shadow approached the parapet that overlooked the harbour. Here it paused, glanced over the parapet and then quickly ducked out of sight.

On board the yacht, the Alsatian stationed there with Peters, its handler, rose slowly to its feet, hackles rising, eyes fixed steadily on the parapet above and a low growl beginning deep in its throat.

The man beside it was instantly alert, placing a hand on the dog's shoulder to hold it quiet while he listened intently with his own eyes fixed on the parapet.

The silence remained unbroken.

Peters chafed under the last instructions the inspector had given him, which was to stay on the yacht whatever happened. That was his responsibility . . . to see that no one got on board. Hopefully, he concentrated on who or what had aroused the dog's interest up there, willing them to come on down, just to set a foot on the yacht where he and Satan

waited in the darkness of the wheelhouse to receive them.

Nobody obliged him. Not another sound disturbed the calm beauty of the night.

The dog gradually relaxed his tensed muscles and, although he still gazed hopefully upwards, when he sat down on his haunches Peters realised that his interest had slackened.

Peters swore silently and sat down again himself, uneasy at the thought that Satan might be susceptible to 'possums still. It had taken a deal of schooling to break him of the joy of hunting them. Perhaps . . .? The man shrugged, and confounded the inspector for hog-tying him to this boat. His alertness remained redoubled for the remainder of the night, however.

All for nothing. The night was undisturbed.

CHAPTER XIV

THE YOUNG inspector and Tom Burton were at the office early the next morning to collect the reports that hadn't been ready for them the evening before. A sheaf of glossy prints from Bob Grey had appeared in the In-tray, a sarcastically long list of fingerprints were found from Jacko, and the doctor's report verifying death by drowning after a knock on the head with the scratches inflicted after death.

Tom looked dreamily into space after reading this.

"Now I can see it all! Gordoni is standing on the deck, portside, and somebody comes up to him, turns on a flying tackle from behind, and they both go over the side with Gordoni's head connecting with the deck in passing. Old Puss happens by and goes in with 'em. Then the killer pulls Gordoni along to the stern and hooks him around the props. Then all he has to do is crawl over the net and he's back in the pool as innocent as you like. Anybody seeing him on top of the net wouldn't take a bit of notice. I've seen kids crawling up it for a dive dozens of times and if the tide was at the full as they say it was there'd only be a few inches of net above the water—and there you are. Simple."

Inspector Nichols considered this dramatisation quite seriously.

"I'm not sure you haven't got something there, Tom—crawling back over the net, I mean."

"My proud moment!" Tom murmured modestly.

"But—he'd have had time to yell during a flying tackle. Too much of a risk for our split-second murderer. No. It was something safer . . . something able to be timed perfectly so as to bring it off unnoticed in all that crowd, Tom."

"That's right—make it as hard as you can," sighed Tom. "And I can make it harder still. Nobody's going to admit doing anything. Hang it, they won't talk about each other let alone about themselves."

"Then we'll have to surprise it out of him, won't we?" smiled Nichols. "Here . . ." He threw his car keys on to the table. "Stop being so helpful and go down to the club and collect all the gear we'll need for a dive . . . flippers, lungs, trunks. Oh, and my sun-glasses are out there somewhere. See if you can find 'em while you're about it."

"A wet nurse as well as cook and bottlewasher," moaned Tom. Then an idea struck him. "And what are *you* going to do, may I ask?"

"I'm going over to Thorntree Point with the reliefs," replied Nichols, careful to keep his face straight. "You'll come over there with the gear and meet me down at the yacht."

"You're damn right I will! And don't you utter one word to the redhead until I get there, do you hear?"

"I must do my job," was the placid reply.

Tom looked fixedly at the wall clock and began working out rapid calculations. "How fast is that car of yours? Let me see . . . by the time you collect the boys and get over there, I can be . . . so long!" He snatched up the keys and vanished.

Nichols was left chuckling in the vacuum left behind. He paused only to ring through to arrange for the reliefs and a police car, however, before following Tom's example.

By the time he arrived at Thorntree Point, dodged a surge of vociferous reporters now hanging about outside, supervised the changing over of the reliefs and heard about a night free from incident except for the short-lived alarm given by the Alsatian for which Peters was unable to account, a bank of clouds had gathered in the southern sky and he paused on his way into the house to study them for a moment. He didn't like

the greenish tinge of them over much. It looked as if one of Sydney's tropical storms were in the offing. He muttered as much to Corbett, who was coming up to take over the day shift in the hall, before hurrying into the house to find Stephen Carter. He also hoped to see Mrs. Gordoni—and Susan, of course.

The first sight to meet his eyes, however, was Stephen Carter and George Field with their heads together in the hall. O'Brien, who should have been there, was nowhere in sight.

The inspector and Corbett paused on the threshold and the lowered voices in the hall paused with them, then George Field turned quietly away and went out through the kitchen. Stephen Carter came forward at once, hand outstretched.

Inspector Nichols watched him with narrowed eyes as he smiled and said, "Good morning, Inspector. Come in. Had breakfast?"

"Yes, thanks." Nichols could see no sign of perturbation on Carter's face, yet—why had that conversation ended so abruptly with his own arrival? "Is everything all right?" he asked.

"Nothing more has happened, if that's what you mean by being all right, Inspector," was the reply. "Signora Gordoni has come out of her drugged sleep but Nancy is staying with her until my wife goes up, as George was just telling me."

Neat and plausible, thought Nichols. Aloud, he said, "Glad to hear she's awake. I must ask her a few things."

"I suppose you've got your job to do," Stephen nodded sympathetically. "She's much steadier this morning, I believe."

"Good. Where's O'Brien, by the way?"

"He's having breakfast in the kitchen," Stephen replied. "I told him he could sit in there and still keep an eye on our doings in the hall if he wanted to. You can see him if you come in a little further."

The inspector stepped in, fixed a stern eye on a munching O'Brien who immediately stopped eating and goggled somewhat guiltily at his superior officer with the disapproving eye of Corbett glaring over his shoulder.

"You're looking after the C.I.B. very well, Mr. Carter," the

inspector remarked, promising by the power of his eyes a few well-chosen words to O'Brien later.

A twinkle appeared in Stephen Carter's eye, but he made no comment.

His host seemed much more cheerful this morning, Nichols thought, turning back in time to catch the twinkle. Could it have been that chat he had had with George? Something had taken a load off his shoulder, at all events.

"What's on the agenda for today?" Carter asked.

"I rather wanted to go around to Balmoral and I wondered if you'd be willing to take us and show us exactly where you anchored yesterday?"

"In the *Sea Spray*, you mean? Of course. I'll tell George to prepare—"

At this juncture out streaked The Old Salt at a flat gallop.

She was followed by a leaping vision in shorts and shirt guaranteed to make any inspector's head reel.

"Where's that dog?" Susan shrieked in passing, chasing after The Old Salt as she vanished down the harbour track.

Nichols blinked, unseized his brain, told Corbett to stay put, and scrambled after Susan with Stephen Carter on his heels.

Screams, hisses, yowls, barks and shouts joined into one grand pandemonium as the two men leapt down on to the landing-stage. Susan was trying to grab the bristling fur of the cat's arched back as it lashed out at an enthusiastic, but wary, Alsatian that was trying to upset the man attached to the other end of its leash.

A boatload of joyful Press cameramen hurried in to record this heaven-sent scoop.

"Puss!" Susan screeched desperately. "Come back here!" and collected a solid smack from a lashing pawful of business-like claws. Puss was too excited and furious to be any respecter of persons at this moment.

"Ow!" Susan jumped back involuntarily straight into the inspector's solid chest.

"Drag that dog off!" Nichols shouted, very conscious of that

brief contact with Susan Carter before she bounced back into the fray sucking her wounds.

"Soon-er—said than done!" panted the dog's handler, leaning backwards on the leash but making no impression.

Catching sight of the grinning cameramen and hearing the clicking of their cameras, Nichols pounced on The Old Salt, getting a hand on the scruff of her neck, but the rigidity of her muscles prevented him getting a hold and he, too, had to dodge smartly as a ball of spitting fury leapt around at him snarling.

"Turn that blasted dog on the Press! Get your daughter out of here, Carter. Do you want her all over the front page of every newspaper?" snarled Nichols.

Susan opened her mouth to retort in kind when her father snapped into action and she was hustled aboard and into the wheelhouse.

"But, Daddy," she protested, angrily, "I can't leave The Old Salt out there. She'll be killed! And what right has he to talk to you like that? Treating me as if I'm a child and can't act for myself!"

"Desperate situations call for desperate measures," her father clipped out. "And don't worry about The Old Salt. Everybody else might be killed but not that old veteran. Put some iodine on those scratches or you'll be the first victim of the fray. And get yourself down below until called—quick smart! You heard what the inspector said . . . you've been providing a field day for those frustrated reporters."

Again Susan opened her mouth to argue.

"Quick smart, I said," her father commanded. "Leave this to us. We'll fix it between us. Your mother thinks that young man equal to any occasion and you know she's never wrong. Below, Sue!"

Susan knew that tone of voice so she ducked out of sight without further comment, but still seething with mutiny.

Her father returned to the deck and surveyed the scene.

The inspector had removed his coat while threatening the Alsatian with removal from the payroll and Peters with a return to the beat. The cameramen were nearly overturning

their boat in their eagerness to make the most of the occasion, and this brought a bright gleam to Stephen's eye.

Quietly, he went around to the portside and picked up a large boathook. Just as quietly he moved up the deck into a strategic position. Casually lowering the boathook and then jerking it up again resulted in a large splash—and the harbour was suddenly a churning mass of cameramen, some still clinging to dripping cameras, others diving and groping for their tools of trade amongst the debris common to the seabeds of harbours the world over.

Stephen pushed the boathook out of sight and stood gazing down innocently at the commotion. The curses and groans were music to his ears.

Hearing an appreciative chuckle from the shore, he looked over and saw the inspector in his shirtsleeves holding a squirming, growling bundle in his jacket and grinning happily at the cameramen.

Stephen said to him solemnly, "They seem to have over-balanced."

"Perhaps you could help them ashore with a boathook—if you have one?" Nichols suggested as solemnly.

"Standard equipment," Stephen assured him. "Just seem to have mislaid it for the moment. But it looks as if rescue is at hand." He waved an arm towards a launch which had drawn near and to which all the swearing men in the water were now heading. The proximity of an interested Alsatian had deterred them from landing on the landing-stage.

"I shouldn't think many of those shots would be worth printing," said Nichols.

"Terrible waste of film," Stephen agreed.

At that moment the suspicious head of Tom Burton reared itself over the parapet above.

"Hey! What's going on down there? Local swimming championships?" he demanded.

The Alsatian, thoroughly excited by now, again felt called upon to pull his red-faced handler's arms out of their sockets as it launched an attack towards Tom.

Tom looked back at it sourly.

"Well-trained!" he commented. "Of course, I did read somewhere that they weren't supposed to bark but just to lurk in the shadows and silently pounce. Still I could be wrong." He transferred his attention to the inspector who was still struggling with an equally excited bundle in the folds of his coat. "I always miss any excitement that's going around!" he mourned. "Put me in the picture."

Susan's head popped out of the landward door of the wheel-house.

"Is it *safe* for me to come out *now*, Daddy?" she asked sarcastically.

Tom's eyes rested on her thoughtfully.

"Even maidens in distress to be rescued, and where is Thomas? Out on business!" His cup of bitterness was full.

With a chuckle, Trevor Nichols called to him to bring down the gear. "And try not to make it too obvious to the Press what's in the wind."

"Okay." Tom vanished.

"Here's your cat, Miss Carter." Nichols went on board and gingerly drew back a corner of his coat. Angry eyes and ears flat on scowling head were not reassuring. "You'd better keep my coat around her. She doesn't look too happy."

"Neither would you if you'd been half smothered," retorted Susan, gathering the taut animal into her arms. "Poor old Puss! What've they been doing to you?"

"Saving the wretched animal from being torn to pieces and you from making news headlines, that's what we've been doing," her father told her. "Now get the thing up to the house and lock her in. We're going—" He almost bit his tongue off but it was too late. It was out.

"Where?" asked Susan instantly.

"Balmoral," her father replied shortly.

"Oh!" Susan paused. "In *Sea Spray*?"

"Yes—and you're *not* coming too!"

Susan shifted her eyes to the inspector.

"I could tell the inspector what I told you last night as we go," she suggested. "Besides, you'll need somebody on the anchor!"

"Jolly good scheme!" Tom Burton arrived with the diving gear shrouded in a car rug in time to hear her remark. "I'm no good on anchors . . . except as hind-man," he beamed winningly at Susan.

She made his day worth living by returning the smile in full measure.

The inspector, however, had become serious.

"Are you going to tell me what happened in the Manly Pool on Saturday, Miss Carter?" he asked.

"Oh, so you know about it?" Stephen Carter was surprised.

"Do you?" countered the inspector. "I wonder why you didn't think it important enough to tell me, Mr. Carter."

"Oh, you mustn't blame Daddy," Susan cut in. "I only told him last night because I wasn't sure whether I should repeat it or not."

"I think you'd better tell me what it was before we go any further, Miss Carter."

Susan looked at her father who nodded.

"All right, then. Well, I was lying on the rocks . . ." and she told the inspector everything she had heard.

"Mmm," he pursed his lips thoughtfully as she finished. "Thanks for telling us. Got it all, Tom?"

Tom, who had dragged out the inevitable notebook as soon as Susan had begun her narrative, nodded.

"Then I think I'll get on up to the house and see if Mrs. Gordon will talk to me before we start off for Balmoral. I expect you'll want Field on the engines, Mr. Carter?"

"Well, he *is* the mechanic, Inspector. There's no-one else . . ."

"Yes. Very well—if you'll put things in motion, I'll send him down when I get up to the house. Tom—just a moment, please." The inspector jerked his head over to the landing-stage. Tom, mystified by the abrupt dismissal of Susan Carter's interesting recital, followed him.

"Tom," said Nichols when they were out of earshot. "Watch Field when he comes down. He and Carter had their heads together when I arrived this morning and broke off a bit too

abruptly when they saw me. Keep him to the engine-room."

"Aye, aye. And what about the girl's story? And does she come with us?"

"She didn't see who it was listening there. Everybody swims like a fish, male and female, so take your choice. It could have been any of them—or a perfect stranger. It gives a jealousy motive, I grant you, *if* Kelleher or Mrs. Gordoni was the eavesdropper. But—do we know if anyone else might have felt similar pangs if Mrs. K. has been as prodigal with her favours as the evidence would suggest?"

"Prying open the jaws of a gift horse!" Tom growled accusingly. "Why can't you take it that it's friend Kelleher and call it a day? I bet if you faced him with it he'd own up."

"Don't be too funny!" the inspector recommended. "And keep an eye on George."

"Oke," Tom promised. "And does Susan come wi—?"

"Yes!" snapped Nichols, making his way up the track to the house.

Once there, he went straight up to Signora Gordoni's room and knocked at the door.

Joyce Carter opened it.

"Oh, good morning, Inspector. Have you . . .?"

"Good morning, Mrs. Carter. Yes, please."

"Oh!" She turned her head to look back into the room.

"Tina, it's the inspector. Will you see him?"

Nichols heard a murmured reply, then Joyce Carter turned back to him.

"She'll see you, but—go easily, won't you?"

"I'll be careful," he assured her, stepping past her into the room. "Will you wait outside? It might be better."

Reluctantly, she went out and closed the door gently behind her.

The inspector went over to the bed and took the chair beside it.

"My name's Inspector Nichols, Mrs. Gordoni," he said. "I'm afraid I must ask you some questions about your husband."

"Marco?" Tina murmured. "Marco's—dead."

"I know," he replied gently. "And we want to catch the person who killed him."

"Oh-h-h! It was—that plan," she moaned softly. "That plan. It was wrong of him. All wrong. I tried to reason with him, but . . ."

The inspector leaned forward attentively.

"What plan was that, Mrs. Gordoni?"

"It has gone, has it not?" she asked dully. "You have—not found it?"

Sunken black eyes turned to his.

He shook his head.

"No. We've found no plan. What kind of plan was it? Can you tell me?"

Her eyes returned to their wanderings over the ceiling.

"I knew—it would be—dangerous. I told him . . ." Her voice trailed away.

"What kind of plan?" Nichols repeated.

"The *macchina*—the new design—that was to make—our fortune," she moaned bitterly. "And now . . . *Dio mio!* Marco has gone and the plan is as nothing any more. I wish he had never heard of it!"

"You think he was killed because of it, then?"

"His Papa treated him always like a little boy. He did not like this. He was going to sell the new auto . . ." Again her voice trailed away.

"Auto? It was a new motor-car engine, perhaps?"

"Si."

"Did anyone know about it? The Carters, for instance?"

"No one knew . . . we thought. But—one must have known, Signor Inspector. One must have!"

"Er—your husband was very attractive to women, I believe? He must have made enemies because of this also, don't you think?"

"It is possible. Women—adored him. I, too."

"Other married women, Mrs. Gordoni?"

"All women, Signor. I see it happen always," she replied dully.

"And—in Italy, the husbands do not regard such a man as an enemy?"

Tina Gordoni moved restlessly in the bed and did not answer.

"And his own wife forgives him, Mrs. Gordoni?" Nichols persisted.

"I loved Marco," she jerked out. "And he always came back to me. That was something they would never have—those others."

"There were many, then?"

"Many. Many."

"And you *always* forgave him? You did not fear any of these women?"

"Fear? I always fear them. But I would not kill Marco for this. I loved him . . . and to me he always returned. Now"—she put a bewildered hand up to her head—"now he returns no more. No more." And she turned away from Nichols and the tears flowed into the pillow she pulled across her face.

The inspector shook his head pityingly, then rose and quietly left the room.

In the corridor, he nodded to Joyce Carter.

"I shan't worry her again today. She's a bit upset at the moment."

"Oh, dear! It's dreadful . . . and there's nothing anyone can do. That's the awful part of it."

"She loved him very much, I gather?"

"He was very charming. I can imagine that, if he set out to do it, he would be irresistible to certain women."

"But not to you, Mrs. Carter?"

"I, too, love my husband, Inspector."

"Mmm! Serve me right," he smiled his crooked smile, drawing an answering one from her. "I shall be taking your husband and George Field to Balmoral any time from now, by the way—or, rather they'll be taking me on the *Sea Spray*. Just in case you wonder where they've gone."

"Susan going too?" she asked casually.

"Mr. Carter said something about needing someone on the anchor," he answered as casually.

"Ah, yes," she replied. "Just so that I know." And she turned away to go back to Tina Gordoni, quick to hide the smile that twitched involuntarily at her lips.

The inspector took the stairs two at a time and landed in the hall calling for Jones.

"Yes, sir?"

"Jones—we're off to Balmoral and I want you on board, too. We're going to dive so I'll want you to see that there's no funny business on board while we're down below. Get it?"

"Got it, sir."

"Right. Come on, then."

CHAPTER XV

WHEN THE inspector arrived back on board the yacht with Jones, he heard the engine turning over and saw that Susan and her father, together with, to his surprise, Kelleher and Harris, were being entertained by Tom Burton. They were still shut in the wheelhouse even though the Press launch had retired to dry off its passengers for there were the Alsatian and Peters still patrolling the decks as efficiently now as if cats did not exist. A fact given the lie by The Old Salt standing up at a window scowlingly following the Alsatian's every movement.

The inspector's lips twitched, then he frowned and lost his good humour of a sudden. That wheelhouse looked much too cosy and friendly. Tom had been making good use of his time seemingly.

Still frowning, Nichols stopped beside Peters and snapped, "What happened here last night? I've had a report that the dog was disturbed by something. What was it?"

"Well, sir, it was just after one o'clock. Satan gave me the alarm and he was staring up at that parapet, sir. I couldn't see or hear anything from down here and, as you'd given me such strict orders not to leave the yacht for an instant, I couldn't go up for a look-see," Peters explained with a slightly self-congratulatory smile.

It was wiped quickly from his face, however, when the inspector's frown deepened in reply.

"Then what?"

"Nothing, sir. Satan just relaxed after a minute or two and there were no further disturbances."

"So you don't know what it was in actual fact?"

Peters became official under the inspector's cold stare.

"According to orders received—"

"All right, all right. It's done now, anyway."

"It might have been only a 'possum, sir."

"Or a cat!" Nichols bit out suggestively. "However, we shan't know now, shall we?" He heard Susan's laugh joining Tom's in the wheelhouse and his expression became frostier still. "And you'd better get that animal back to barracks for some extra training. I don't want a similiar exhibition as we had earlier."

"Yes, sir. No, sir."

Peters lost no time in removing himself and his dog from under that chilly eye, muttering to himself as he went, "Wonder what's made him lose his sense of humour all of a sudden?"

How was he to know that the sight of Susan laughing and chaffing with Tom while she treated his superior officer to the direct opposite did not exactly warm the cockles of that superior officer's heart—especially when the laughter died a sudden death as soon as he opened the wheelhouse door.

"Ah, Inspector," Stephen Carter greeted him. "We're ready when you are. I've roped in Kelleher and Harris as crew. Okay by you?"

"Okay," nodded the inspector. "How is the glass, by the way? I don't like the look of the sky."

"Dropping fast, Inspector. We're in for a squall. Probably hail, if I read the signs right. That's why I was glad to see these two coming down the track."

The inspector looked at both Kelleher and Harris with eyes that disguised a great deal of speculation as to why they had bothered to come down the track at just this time. He merely nodded.

"Good idea. We'd better get off as soon as possible, then, if you wouldn't mind?"

"Just say the word. Tom here tells me you're going to dive?"

So it'd got to Christian names? Nichols glanced at Tom, collected a triumphant wink, was not amused and turned back to Carter.

"That's right," he replied. "So consider the word said. Okay?" And all he could manage was a tight-lipped smile. Must be his liver, he thought. He even felt like throwing a punch at Tom! Sooner he had some exercise the better.

"Did you bring all the gear, Tom?"

"At your feet, O Master," quoth Tom, pointing to a jumble of aqualungs, fins and swimsuits on the deck.

"You can change down below, Inspector," said Stephen, who was already signalling 'Reverse engines' to George waiting below in the engine-room. "But first—would you help Kelleher and Harris to cast off for me fore and aft?"

"I'm here, Daddy." Susan spoke for the first time since the inspector had arrived.

"You take that cat below before she gets into more trouble and stay there yourself until we get away from any Nosy Parkers who might still be hanging around. That's an order."

"Oh-h-h!" Pursing her lips mutinously, Susan obeyed orders nevertheless.

Tom and Nichols went out on deck with the two other men, stationed themselves as ordered, and *Sea Spray* was soon moving out into a strong head wind.

The sun was still shining on the north shore but the light was becoming eerie and unreal to the south where the buildings were standing out sharply white against a dark-grey sky with an ominous green tinge to it. The wind was gusting itself into readiness for a final onslaught and yachts were hurrying into the comparative safety of the bays around the harbour shores. Sails were rattling down everywhere.

"Blast!" Nichols eyed the oncoming summer storm sourly. "It would have to blow up today!"

"Looks like a beauty, too," Carter remarked. "You'll remember that Balmoral isn't all that sheltered, won't you? *Sea Spray's* pretty solid but I may have to face the wind so don't

flap if you see the propellers going from down below. Keep well clear."

"We'll do that little thing," Nichols commented dryly. "I'm sorry to drag you around there on such a day, but I must look over the actual scene of the crime before my Super starts asking awkward questions." While he was speaking, his eyes rested thoughtfully on Kelleher and Harris who were standing out on deck like two perfect strangers, neither of whom was sufficiently interested in the other to start up a conversation. Nichols wondered why they had come on board so opportunely. Kelleher might have got bored with hanging around the house with nothing to do. But, Harris? On impulse he asked Tom in a voice calculated to carry, "Tom, have you got that sketch of Gordoni as Bowers saw him in the water?"

Both heads turned towards him with—interest?

"Efficient Thomas as always!" chirped Tom, sorting through several papers he had fished out of his pocket until he found the required drawing.

By that time, Kelleher and Harris had both reached the wheelhouse and were waiting, neither face readable.

The inspector took the sketch and held it for Stephen Carter to see in such a way that the other two could see it as well. He was rewarded by hearing more than one breath catch as he held the life-like sketch aloft.

So they were *all* interested, were they?

"Take a look at this, Mr. Carter," he said. "Does it seem okay to you?"

Stephen glanced away from the harbour ahead and down at the paper. His mouth tightened and he jerked his head away again.

"God! That's too damned life-like!"

"Mmm—just as you saw it, too?"

"Didn't know he could draw so well!" was the terse reply.

"Sure there's nothing left out?" Nichols persisted. "Head between the blades, legs astride the shaft, and body wedged firmly between—"

"Must you, Inspector?" Carter exclaimed. "I shan't forget how he looked. You needn't worry about that."

"Sorry. I just wanted to make sure that Bowers wasn't trying anything on with me."

"That's practically photographic," Carter jerked out.

There was silence for a moment.

"Did Gordoni say anything to you—to any of you—about a plan for a new-type engine?"

Carter stiffened as if he had received an electric shock, but he managed to reply, "He didn't say anything to me, no."

Nichols raised his eyebrows at Kelleher's baffled expression.

"Don't know what the hell you're talking about," Kelleher growled in reply. "New engine? Nobody said anything to me about it."

"And *I* have heard nothing, Inspector," said Harris precisely. "But then, I am only the chief accountant, so . . ."

"What made you ask that, Inspector?" Kelleher's voice drowned him out. "Anything goin' on I should know about, Steve?"

"Nothing's going on, John," Carter replied. "Where did you hear about this, Inspector?"

"Mrs. Gordoni. It's a plan Gordoni had with him, Mr. Kelleher, which he was going to sell outside his father's firm with the praiseworthy intention of ruining him—and anybody else with large sums of money invested in the company."

"What?" exploded Kelleher, wrathfully. "But we *all* had money invested in it, blast him!"

Harris's eyes narrowed keenly but it looked as if he was just as surprised at Kelleher, unless both men were superb actors. Carter was still saying nothing.

"Why, the blasted little Wop!" Kelleher continued. "Without lettin' us even get a look at it? That what you mean?"

The inspector nodded.

"According to his wife, his idea was to ruin his father."

"But—but—but—that would have meant ruining us, too. Steve . . ."

"Well, he can't now, can he?" Carter replied quietly.

Kelleher's jaw dropped for a moment, then he almost smiled, recollected himself in time and coughed instead.

Harris, whose alertness had increased until he resembled a greyhound on the scent, spoke at last.

"And where is this plan at the present moment, Inspector?"

Nichols lounged back with both elbows on the binnacle so that he could watch all three faces at once.

"Well, now," he said, "if we only knew that, maybe all our worries would be over."

"You mean—it's gone?" Kelleher grated out.

"Shall we say that it is not in Mrs. Gordoni's possession?"

"Ah!" Harris put in almost briskly. "Then, do you mean that Gordoni was killed for that plan, Inspector?"

"It's a distinct possibility." Nichols waited but nobody else wanted to say anything now. They all became lost in thoughts best not expressed aloud, he guessed. Certainly, none of them cared to catch the eye of the others.

Tom, thoroughly at sea in all this double-talk about a plan he had never heard of until this minute, kept his eyes darting from one to the other, searching for a glimmer of light.

No glimmer.

Nichols sighed and shoved himself off the binnacle.

"Come on, Tom," he said, irritably. "Let's change. We won't have all that much time before the light goes."

"Oke."

Tom picked up their swimming trunks and marched purposefully towards the gangway leading down to the cabins. He was halted by the sudden appearance of The Old Salt springing into view, tail lashing and nostrils twitching inquisitively, followed by Susan who glared around in much the same manner and addressed nobody at all with, "Anyone would think I was a hot-house plant, the way I'm tucked cosily out of the way when anything interesting is going on."

As 'nobody at all' did not reply, she went on, "Ordered around like a coolie on my own father's boat!"

Still no reply.

Only Tom smiled at her sympathetically as he followed 'nobody at all' below. It was wasted, for Susan had eyes only for 'nobody at all'. Seeing he was not in the least impressed, or did not show it, she transferred her glares towards the

approaching storm and a thoughtful silence fell in the wheel-house until *Sea Spray* neared her anchorage off Balmoral.

Down below, Tom was being brought up to date by Nichols while they changed.

"We'd better check on Gordoni's financial record, Tom," Nichols continued when he had covered the main points. "Might lead to something we haven't thought of." Then he paused and said after a moment or two, "Tom—do you think either Carter or Field killed Gordoni for that plan?"

If the inspector hoped to be reassured, he was mistaken. Tom considered the question in all seriousness and said, "They are old P.O.W. coppers . . . and I'll bet they both did their share of quiet killing up there in Malaya. I'd *hope* Carter didn't do it on account of the redhead, mind you, but we've got to look at it squarely, Trev. He could have. And so could Field. We've only got their word for it that they stayed put in one place all the time."

"I think I'd take Carter's word," Nichols clipped out.

"Nothing I'd like better, either. But . . ." Tom shook his head. "But he could have. And there are those confounded facts the Super *will* have."

Impatiently, the inspector nodded. "I know. And we'd better watch ourselves when we dive, Tom. Harris and Kelleher being on board might be a coincidence . . . but, no harm in being cautious."

"Give me strength!" moaned Tom. "Just what I needed to make me a brave little boy! Brother, if it wasn't for the redhead, I'd ask for a transfer here and now."

No reply. The inspector was engrossed in securing a belt he wore for diving. It was hung with various attachments he considered necessary, including a knife and a bag to hold anything he might want to bring up with him.

Tom watched him for a moment, then shook his head with a grin.

"You do clutter yourself up, don't you?" he commented. "Just like a Christmas tree!"

"Never know when they'll come in handy," was the quiet reply.

"Magpie!" Tom grunted and ostentatiously clipped over his own trunks a belt from which hung a solitary knife and nothing else. He slapped it affectionately. "Look at me—stripped for action—just like Hans Haas. Ha, ha, ha!" he laughed ironically.

"Ready?" asked Nichols.

"Gr-r-r! I can't wait to let those dear little sharks have a go at me!"

So up they went to join the others on deck as Stephen Carter brought *Sea Spray* to anchorage.

Again nobody spoke to nobody—but the air bristled and sparked between Susan and the young inspector, and one pair of eyes slid a certain way when another pair were occupied elsewhere, and vice versa, so that when *Sea Spray* was swinging on her anchor chain to face the wind, and Susan had returned to the wheelhouse, she was followed by a wistful sigh from Inspector Nichols as he moved after her with Tom in close and amused order. None of these vice versas had escaped his sharp eyes, and, after a few sighs of regret of his own, he had settled down to watch proceedings with wry amusement.

"This is about where we were," Carter told the inspector. "But with this head wind, we're further out from the net, of course, and not Broadside on as we were yesterday. Yesterday!" he exclaimed. "Good lord, it seems like years ago!"

"Can't think what you hope to find down there, Nichols," Kelleher grunted.

"Must view the scene of the crime," Tom answered brightly. "There's a section on the report sheet especially for it."

"Hah!" snorted Kelleher, "And in triplicate, I'll bet!" and he turned away to watch with a critical eye as Nichols picked up an aqualung and adjusted it to his requirements.

Warren Harris stood by only mildly interested in the preparations.

"Can I take a bearing from any landmarks, Mr. Carter?" Nichols asked.

Stephen led the way out on deck and around to the stern with Nichols, Tom and Susan following him. George Field's head popped out of the after-hatchway to watch in silence,

while Kelleher and Harris leaned over the rails near the wheelhouse. Stephen pointed shorewards.

"See that line of gum trees in the streets going up the hill? I was looking straight along it while I was leaning against the wheelhouse."

"Mm-mm," Nichols grunted and measured a few distances with his eye. Keenly aware of hostile glances from Susan Carter and George Field but pretending otherwise, he went on to take another assessment of the storm now closing down on them rapidly. Neither of the other three men on board appeared to be taking more than ordinary interest in his preparations, he noticed at the same time, so he made a signal to Tom and the two detectives hastened to fasten on their flippers and masks.

At this point, Stephen Carter felt that a warning might not come amiss apparently for he said, "Sharks have been seen just off Middle Head this year, Inspector."

The inspector nodded briefly without comment but Tom, making a comical face before adjusting his mask, said, "Just what I needed to spur me on!" and bit hard on his mouth-piece.

"George!" Carter called. "Hang the steps over the side, will you?"

George stepped out of the engine-room.

"Starb'd?" he asked, eyeing the detective sourly.

Carter looked questioningly at Nichols who nodded and George walked around the wheelhouse with Tom keeping a sharp eye on him. He had known harmless bystanders do strange things to policemen before today, and nobody could call George Field a harmless bystander, he felt. However, he could find nothing amiss with the steps when they were in place and Nichols, with a final glance around to get his bearings, jerked a thumb and both detectives dropped overboard, with Tom finding time only for a brief wave to Susan before he vanished beneath the water bubbling a brief prayer to the god of sharks to keep his flock occupied elsewhere for the time being.

CHAPTER XVI

FOR UNDERWATER work, the two detectives had perfected a mime language and Tom began to converse in this manner as soon as they were both floating just above the sandy bottom of the harbour. Visibility was not as good as it might have been owing to the approaching storm clouds. The water was dull and grey beneath the surface, with, however, still a flash of sunlight filtering down here and there. The hull of the *Sea Spray* could still be seen above and Tom indicated that he, for one, was glad to see it. Then he grinned. But what, he continued, if they were all in on the murder up there and were welcoming this opportunity of depriving the C.I.B. of two of its most promising detectives?

He received a sour look for his pains and an abrupt reply to the effect that Jones was on the job up there and that he'd better get on with his down here.

Tom eyed his friend curiously for a moment then began to peer diligently around him.

"What am I looking for?" he signalled.

"Blunt instrument."

"Some hope!" Tom shook his head. Darkness was closing in much faster now and he shivered and pointed hopefully upwards, but Nichols beckoned him on inexorably and, with a flip of his feet, sailed ahead to where the shark net hung, black and heavy, between beach and open harbour.

Hastily, and with many a shark-haunted glance over his shoulder, Tom followed. Several rocks had tumbled down from the cliffs at some time and, as the two men drew nearer the shoreline where the net was anchored, the rocks multiplied and Tom's eyes were caught by the fish flickering through the dark tunnels amongst them, goggling out curiously at him as he passed their hidey-holes. A platform of seaweed floated near and Tom sheered away from it fastidiously. He could not like the way the stuff clung to his skin. You never knew what was creeping and crawling through it. And he had never believed Hans Haas either when he said you only had to say "Boo" to a shark. Like hell! Blunt instruments? Amongst this mess of old tins and boots on the harbour floor? He'd been down several times to pick up odds and ends but—no blunt instrument.

Wrapped in such intense concentration, Tom did not have much time to keep an eye on Nichols's activities, and, suddenly, he realised that he was alone. The sun was going in again, too.

Tom's legs jack-knifed to bring him to a standing stop.

Suspended between surface and seabed, he peered around anxiously for some sign of Trevor. Tom had not been an underwater swimmer for as long as Nichols' and he had never taken to it with much enthusiasm, anyway, he realised now. In fact, his heart still jumped when anything moved near him unexpectedly. And the one thing he had never done before was to go down entirely alone. Now he knew why! The loneliest feeling he had ever experienced gripped him as he looked about. Not knowing what was outside a radius of what could only be ten feet made a man feel vulnerable, he discovered. And alone—utterly!

The gregarious Tom did not enjoy the sensation one little bit. Yet he didn't fancy making a move, either. At least he knew what was in his ten foot radius. Outside it, anything might be lurking. Getting even darker, too. Much. He couldn't be sure now that he knew where the surface was! It all looked the same. Suppose he'd been standing on his head all this time? Tom gulped. Only one way to solve this,

and he kicked out frantically with his flippers for what he hoped would be the surface.

Bubbles of relief sprang out from his mask as he saw above him the dark shape of the *Sea Spray* again.

As he was making for it, something moved just outside his line of vision. He just caught it out of the corner of his eye. Once again he jack-knifed to a standstill. His eyes strained as he fixed them on that vague shape. Then his blood ran colder than the water surrounding him. The shape was sailing closer. Closer. Tom's hand went to his knife. The shape glided up to him—and Tom nearly fainted with relief.

Trevor Nichols came up, patted his shoulder encouragingly and held up something he was holding in his other hand for Tom to see.

It was a pair of fishing gloves, one inside the other and both weighted down with a business-like wrench which still protruded from the elastic wrist band.

Tom asked jubilantly where Nichols had found it.

He pointed to where the anchor chain gripped the sand and strained to hold the *Sea Spray* in position against the rising wind.

As he pointed, the chain went slack of a sudden, then tightened as suddenly. The grapnel, pushed out of position by the slackness, lost its grip at the tightening and the two detectives kicked wildly to get out of the way as the heavy chain surged towards them.

Tom was the first to react to the danger and he was feet ahead of Nichols as the chain almost flicked towards them. He was already under the hull of the *Sea Spray* when he felt, rather than saw, that Nichols was being sucked away from him towards the propellers in a current set up by the racing of the screws as the boat strove to maintain position against the release of the anchor. He snatched wildly and managed to grab a handful of Nichols's hair. Kicking desperately, he hauled with all his strength, striving to reach out for the star-board steps.

Nichols kicked his flippers at the same time with the result that he rose upwards with such speed that he bumped his

back against the hull before he could throw out a hand and grip the steps himself.

As Tom came up beside him, he was horrified to see trails of blood in the water. With goose pimples rising all over him he literally hurled Nichols up the ladder while his own eyes rolled around the points of the compass in expectation of sharks that the blood would call out in a pack, nothing surer.

Nichols suddenly stopped half-way up and Tom looked up anxiously, to meet Nichols's eyes signalling to him. He looked down to find that he was holding Trevor's ankles in a frantic grip.

"Try it out," Nichols signalled.

Tom shook his head frantically and pointed upwards, but Nichols was adamant, refusing to move. In desperation, Tom jerked the ankle and Nichols came tumbling down almost on top of him.

When they had sorted themselves out, Nichols nodded jubilantly, "That's how it was done!" and, at last, condescended to pull himself out of the water.

Tom tried to follow but the water dragged at his legs like leaden weights while his flippers slipped off each step in his haste until he arrived on deck at last, chest heaving with fright. He leant against the wheelhouse and patted it affectionately, disregarding the hail that was now falling around him.

"Am I glad to see you!" he told the wheelhouse, after spitting out his mouthpiece and lifting his mask to the top of his head.

"What happened down there?" Carter called anxiously from the shelter of the wheelhouse with Jones peering as anxiously over his shoulder.

"Look at his back," Tom replied. "It's a wonder we didn't have every shark in the Pacific nipping at us!"

Nichols, who could now feel the sting of the cuts for the first time, put a hand behind him and, when he brought it back, found it was running with blood. He also noticed that he was still clutching the thing he had been showing to Tom

when the anchor chain had dragged. Pity! He had been going to keep that a secret for the time being. As casually as he could he stuffed it into the bag hanging from his belt, but he noticed that Kelleher and Harris, huddled in waterproofs over the anchor winch, were both looking his way though the hail hid their expressions from him. Stephen Carter might have only been looking at the cuts on his shoulders as he shouted, "Sue—First-aid! Come in here out of that hail, man!"

Susan turned away out of the doorway where she had been standing with—was it a worried frown on her face? Nichols wondered. For him—or for Tom? And there were Field's eyes just disappearing down below the engine-room, aft. Well—he could presume that they had all seen his find, he told himself glumly, as he meekly obeyed Susan Carter's instructions to stand on a waterproof she had laid down on the wheelhouse floor while she sorted out disinfectant, bandage and tape. Over her head, his eyes met Jones's questioningly. A slight shake of the head assured him that Jones had seen nothing suspicious.

"How did you manage to cut yourself like that?" asked Carter, examining the cuts with a sympathetic wince.

"Barnacles on the hull, I guess," Nichols replied tersely.

Carter stiffened.

"Was that how Gordoni . . .?"

"Possibly," Nichols nodded and winced, himself, as Susan applied antiseptic, bandage and tape.

She had paled at her father's words and Tom, hoping to divert her mind from the gruesome, murmured, "Some people have all the luck—and there he is—pretending it hurts!"

Susan made no reply, and Trevor Nichols went on wincing as if his skin had not been tingling enjoyably to every touch of her hand.

"You'd better get below and change into some of the sweaters you'll find down there," Carter recommended, noticing that Tom was now shivering like a dog. "The storm's brought the temperature down with a wallop. Hurry it up,

Sue. D'you want him to get pneumonia? You're taking a time over it."

Not nearly long enough, Nichols objected silently, before Carter continued, "Shake it up, girl. I want to get out of here before that anchor drags again." He turned to Nichols. "There was a moment back there when we thought you might run into trouble. Old Harris suddenly let go at the winch. What can you expect of a landlubber!" Carter snorted. "I should have known better than to trust him with it. If it hadn't been for Kelleher pouncing right smartly and doing the right thing . . . ! And if you hadn't come up when you did, I think this girl of mine would have made me go down to see if you were all right."

"A miss is as good as a mile," replied Nichols, warning Tom by a glance to say nothing. "Thanks for being concerned about us, Miss Carter, and thanks for the first-aid."

Susan's eyes flicked up at him for a moment, then dropped away again as she gathered up the first-aid kit, but Trevor Nichols felt a warm glow where he needed it most.

"That's all right," she murmured, very conscious that his eyes had not left her even though she moved away.

"Then let's get out of here before we foul that net—unless you've got something else in mind, Inspector?" her father broke the spell.

Nichols started out of his thoughts.

"Oh. No. No, thanks. We've had a look round below—so as soon as you like."

Later, when Nichols was hauling one of Stephen Carter's sweaters over his head, The Old Salt galloped along the corridor outside chasing nothing with all the enthusiasm of her kind. He paused to stare at her with sudden concentration.

Tom, sticking his own head up through another sweater, was growling, "You're a lucky so-and-so. Nothing a female likes more than playing Florence Nightingale. Just when I was getting my nose in front, you have to . . ." His voice trailed to a stop when he noticed that Nichols was standing looking with deep concentration at the pair of fishing gloves they had brought up out of the harbour. "What's up?"

Nichols held up one of the gloves to show four jagged tears across the back of it. "I think here we have the answer, Tom. Here," he lowered his voice to a whisper, "here in this glove!",

CHAPTER XVII

INSPECTOR NICHOLS marched briskly into his office. As briskly, that is, as half a dozen stiffening barnacle cuts across his shoulders would allow.

He was followed by Tom Burton, bursting with exasperated curiosity.

"By the ghost of great Caesar!" he was grinding out. "If you don't tell me soon, I'll burst! 'This might be the answer!' he crows, and then he does the best imitation of a clam I've seen outside the Pacific Ocean!"

"I suppose you wanted me to tell all the others on board the yacht as well, you blithering idiot? Yachts weren't built for private conversations, especially if any of the others were interested enough to put an ear to a ventilator. Use your loaf! Now just get out your sketches of that boat and I'll endeavour to show you what the answer is."

"At last!" Tom screeched, dramatically, placing the desired sketches on the inspector's desk in double-quick time. "At last!"

"Now . . ." Nichols took up a pencil and dropped his under-water bag on the table. "First—blunt instrument." The wrench came out with a dull thud. "Second—the gloves. Four neat tears. What does that suggest to you?"

Tom's eyes sharpened. "You don't mean—Pussy's claws?"

"Right on the button!" Nichols nodded. "Same as on Susan Carter's hand, remember?"

Tom whistled.

"What does Puss do when held aloft and does not feel secure?"

"Digs its claws into the nearest solid object."

"And we found no claw marks on paint or woodwork on the boat, right?"

"Right. So you reckon Puss *was* tossed in with malice aforethought?"

Nichols poked at the sketch of the yacht with his pencil.

"To get Carter away from that starboard side. Now, look here at the port side. Supposing someone stood there behind the wheelhouse—would he be visible to anybody swimming in the pool, do you think?"

Tom considered this, screwing up his eyes as he tried to conjure up such a scene on board the yacht as he had come to know it.

"No, I don't think he would."

"Would Carter see him from where he says he was standing on the starboard side?"

Tom scratched his head.

"Quite a bit of woodwork amongst the glass there. I suppose if someone wanted to stay out of sight, it could be done. But—how did he get there?"

"Er—oh! Yes. How did he?" It was the inspector's turn to pause. Then—"Three alternatives. Engine-room hatchway—main cabin gangway to wheelhouse—or over the side from the water."

Tom shook his head dubiously.

"I won't pay the last one. The deck's too high above the water. Couldn't reach up high enough for a purchase. Engine-room hatchway? George Field, you mean? If you don't that can be cut out, too. Leaves only the cabin gangway." Tom pursed his lips. "Risky."

"Why? If anyone saw him he wasn't doing anything more than coming back on deck after going below for something. If nobody saw him, there was nothing to prevent him going out to the port side taking The Old Salt with him."

"Mm-mmm."

"All he has to do is watch for his chance and—"

"Now wait a minute!" Tom stopped him in mid-stride. "Do you mean to tell me Old Portside has the cat, the wrench and the fishing mits all lined up beside him on the off-chance? And when *did* he pinch that wrench and those fishing mits?"

"How the devil do I know when he pinched them, or even if he did? They might be his own," Nichols retorted, niggled by Tom's objections. "All I know is that he must have had them because he undoubtedly used them."

"And is Chiefee going to be satisfied with that? Where are his beloved facts, old son?"

"I'll get 'em when I get whoever pinched that wrench."

"Hah! Listen to him! And who's going to tell you he pinched the wrench?"

"Shut up! Now—will you grant me that Portside, as you call him, had these things on hand?"

"I'll grant you that much. So he's lurking behind the wheel-house hoping for Providence to live up to its name."

"Ignoring the sarcasm, we come to the perfect opportunity for, if there had *not* been one, Portside would have packed up and waited for one, you may be sure. In fact, he may have been waiting for one to turn up ever since Gordoni signed his own death warrant by doing the Something that put the idea of murder into Portside's mind in the first place."

"Sex," Tom asserted. "I still stick to Sex."

"Whatever it was," stated Nichols determinedly. "Anyway, Gordoni himself provides the opportunity by swimming back to the boat alone—perhaps for a drink, a cigarette, a private chat with Carter? Who knows? Portside sets his timing to a split second on the second, lets himself down into the water with Puss. Leaves her to get on with it after unfastening her claws from the fishing glove he'd put on to protect—"

"Protect?" cut in Tom. "Or to eliminate fingerprints?"

"Either—or."

"All right. Go on before my brain gets properly addled," Tom sighed, resignedly.

"Well—up swims Puss to the surface to howl for help. Carter hears her and leaves the starboard side to look. Gordoni

puts his foot on the ladder like I did this morning. Portside, having swum under or around the boat to get there in time, grabs Gordoni's ankle—like you did this morning to mine—yanks him into the water outside the net, clocks him with the wrench and holds him under for the required length of time. Then he hauls him along the hull to keep him below the surface, accounting for the cuts on Gordoni's chest and tummy, then rams him around the propellor hoping that when the engines start up—mincemeat."

Tom grimaced distastefully.

"Delightful!"

"That done," Nichols went on undeterred, "Portside rips off the canvas gloves which, incidentally, must have protected his hands from the barnacles, weights them with the wrench and lets them go. Then all he has to do is haul himself back over the net into the pool—and wait."

"Must have been a nasty shock when he came back on board and found Gordoni lying on the deck," remarked Tom, sardonically. "It's all very ingenious, Trev, but it seems a long time for a bloke to stay underwater without an aqualung, doesn't it? I mean, the boat's a fair length. To haul a bod along to the stern underwater . . ."

"Look up your sketches again, youngster," Nichols pointed sorrowfully to one showing the entire yacht from the parapet above the anchorage at Thorntree Point. "How long to dive under that keel and come up the other side?"

"About thirty seconds, I imagine."

"Thirty seconds. Up for air behind the steps, starboard. Head above water until he bobs down to pull Gordoni in. Two seconds at most to clock him with the wrench. No need to go under himself in order to hold Gordoni under until he drowns. Nor to haul Gordoni along just under the keel to the stern."

Tom's lips quirked dubiously.

"He must have been damn lucky not to be seen by Susan or Bowers, either when they swam back to the boat or when they went in after the cat."

"He would be watching and timing his moves. He'd only

have to bob under for a bit. You must remember that they weren't expecting to see anyone swimming there. They wouldn't even give a glance downwards in all probability."

"I was thinking of through the water from the port side when they picked up the cat, mostly."

Nichols shook his head decidedly.

"Not if the murderer was already hauling Gordoni along the keel, and he must have been at the stern if he got away before Bowers swam around there and found Gordoni tucked into the blades."

"Yes. Suppose he must have. Nice bit of timing you're relying on here, Trev."

"I'm sure it must have happened this way, Tom. And if there had been a sign of complications to upset the schedule, I'm damned sure our old friend Portside would have scrubbed the lot."

"You sound as if you know him well," Tom grinned.

"Not quite well enough to be able to walk up to him and accuse him point blank," Nichols replied thoughtfully. "But if somebody's got scratches on their hands or arms they can't account for . . . ! I didn't notice any, I must admit, but any of them could have kept one hand in a pocket quite naturally when I didn't know I should be looking for scratches. Now I'm going to look ! So—back to Thorntree Point and a nice show of hands, Tom . . . and get a warrant made out for us to take with us. Name—blank . . . until I find those scratches."

"Whoa, now," Tom protested. "Any of them might have collected barnacle scratches at any time. It's easy enough. You can't rely on that alone, Trev. The Chief wouldn't accept a stab in the dark like that."

Nichols shrugged.

"It's all I've got to flush him out with. It might just frighten him into making a mistake."

"A cool customer like the one you've been telling me about?" Tom's face screwed up incredulously. "The one who worked out that precious time-sheet you've been handing me? You'll be lucky, chum !"

Absent-mindedly, the inspector scooped up a memo from his

In-tray and looked at it unseeingly while he pondered his next move over at Thorntree Point. Suddenly, his eyes focused sharply on the writing. Then he handed the memo to Tom and headed out of the office at speed.

Tom caught up with him at the door of the superintendent's office. The superintendent's roar bade them enter.

"Oh, it's you at last, is it? Bathing party over?"

"Yes, sir. Blunt instrument recovered." Down went the wrench on the superintendent's desk. "Possible plan of murder evolved." Down went the fishing gloves, and Nichols detailed his theories concerning them.

"What utter rot! Not a fact in the lot!" snarled the superintendent as he concluded. "Well, luckily for us all, I *have* got some facts for you. Dixon's reported back from the Gordoni Works. He also had the gumption to visit the bank Gordoni used and he found an interesting amount of two thousand pounds paid in since he arrived here by—here's the signature." He shovelled a cancelled cheque over the table. "Add that to this statement made by the chief clerk of Gordoni's," over came another sheet of paper, "and you've got the neatest little motive for murder you could hope for. With that and what you've *fabricated* you ought to be able to deliver the murderer to me by"—he consulted his wrist watch—"by sixteen-hundred hours on the dot. In short, in one hour's time."

CHAPTER XVIII

EXACTLY FIFTEEN minutes later, the red Sprite was rolling to a standstill outside the house on Thorntree Point, a warrant nestling in the inspector's pocket. It needed only a name to be operational. Inspector Nichols could have filled it in, he imagined, but it was better to play safe. If he happened to be making the wrong guess and had to make a quick switch, the warrant would still be there.

In tense silence, the two detectives walked towards the front door, alerting the men on guard as they went.

Nancy Field opened the door to them.

"Oh—back so soon, Inspector? Everybody's in the living-room. They've had lunch."

Nichols smiled down at her questioning face.

"It's all right, Mrs. Field. We've had ours this time. Would you and your husband come into the living-room, too, please. We've got something to say and I'd like everyone to hear it. Mrs. Gordoni still in her room?"

"Yes, Inspector. She's still not too good."

"Able to come down, do you think?"

"We-e-ell . . . best she didn't if she doesn't have to."

"All right. We'll leave her there for a moment."

"I'll just get George, then, and we'll be right back."

Nancy Field went towards the kitchen and Nichols signalled Tom to follow and make sure they did as she said. He, him-

self, gave a few instructions to Corbett who was on duty in the hall and then went into the living-room.

As he entered, Stephen Carter sprang up with surprise.

"Why, Inspector—I didn't expect . . ." He noticed Nichols's serious face. "What is it?"

"Is everybody here?"

The inspector looked sternly into each face turned towards him. Expectancy, query, surprise, apprehension: all the expected expressions were there, and there were no faces missing except the Fields' and they came in at that moment followed unobtrusively by Tom Burton, who leaned against the closed door and took out his notebook.

"Ah, yes," said Nichols. "Now Field, you can hand over that paper you've been looking after all this time."

"Paper?" George looked blank. "I haven't—"

"Oh, fork it out, George," Stephen broke in abruptly. "Get rid of the damn thing!"

Nichols turned to him.

"You knew Field had it, Mr. Carter?"

"You did, apparently," Stephen countered.

"I merely guessed. And you?"

"He told me he'd taken it when we knew, definitely, that it was murder and I advised him to put it back where he—found it. But he couldn't get on to the boat again to do it."

"Did you consider that he might have murdered to get it?"

"The thought crossed my mind, at first," Stephen admitted grimly. "Gave me some nasty moments."

"Well, I never did!" exclaimed Nancy Field indignantly.

"Let it rest, old girl," her husband cut her short, bringing a folded sheet of paper out of his shirt pocket and handing it to the inspector.

Kelleher laughed suddenly.

"So you *did* have it, did you, Steve? Somehow, I thought you did." And he laughed again.

"Are you suggesting that I killed Gordoni to get hold of it, John?" Stephen asked quietly.

"Wouldn't put it past you, if you thought you might lose

all this." Kelleher swept his arm in a wide circle to embrace the house and garden.

"What utter rubbish!" Joyce cried angrily. "Why, Stephen was in full sight of us all, all the time!"

Nichols remained silent, giving them enough rope. Three pairs of hands were hidden from him for one reason or another, so he was content to bide his time. Stephen Carter answered for him, anyway.

"Except when I was looking for The Old Salt, hon," he said quietly, but his eyes were coldly holding Kelleher's hot, accusing glare. "Perhaps you'd like to make something of that, John? I had enough time before Susan and Peter came on board . . . except that, fully clothed as I was, I could have hardly gone swimming without someone taking notice."

"You were fully clothed when I came back on board—and ringin' wet!" cried Kelleher, triumphantly. "Explain that away!"

"I dived in fully clothed to get Gordoni off the propellor—and well you know it!"

"And where were you at the time, may I ask?" Joyce Carter's wrath descended on John Kelleher's head. "In the water—you say! Well, it took place in the water, didn't it?"

"Blast it, I didn't kill Gordoni—not that I hadn't thought of it but . . ."

Betty Kelleher entered the fray. She leant forward in her chair and hissed, "If I thought you had done it—!"

At the sound of her voice, Kelleher seemed to go mad.

"I had every right to think of it! D'you think I'm blind? I heard the pair of you carrying on in that pool like a couple of dogs in heat!"

Joyce Carter gasped.

"John! That will do! I will not have such language in my home!"

"What can you expect from a man who goes about snooping on his wife!" Betty spat out. "Well, you won't do it again, John Kelleher. Not to me! I've had enough!"

"Can't be soon enough for me!" shouted Kelleher, beside himself. "You can get out just as soon as—"

"One moment!"

The inspector's sharp voice brought them all back to their senses.

"May I remind you that we are here to find a murderer?" He paused, saw that he had their attention once more, then went on. "As it seems that everybody in this room had the time and the opportunity to murder Marco Gordoni—"

Bowers's falsetto voice interrupted him.

"Except me, you mean, don't you?"

"No. I don't, Mr. Bowers."

Bowers bounced excitedly in his chair.

"But I f-found him! Damn it all, I found—"

"You had the time to drown him, also, if he had been at the stern of the boat by the time you reached it. Such a coincidence"—he went on quickly as Bowers opened his mouth again—"such a coincidence would set a strain on our credulity . . . but it could have been done."

Bowers eyed him wrathfully for some seconds, unable to speak. The inspector took the opportunity to ask, "Did you, in fact, kill Marco Gordoni, Mr. Bowers?"

"You know damn well I didn't!" screeched Bowers. "You c-can't talk to me like th-that and get away with it. I'll report—"

Nichols, who had taken no further notice of the young man, now drew the pair of fishing gloves out of his pocket and Bowers stopped speaking abruptly and shot a quick, startled look at Susan.

"Do these gloves belong to anybody here?" asked Nichols, holding them up.

Susan gasped.

"They look like the gloves I wear when I swab the decks."

"Where do you usually keep them, Miss Carter?" Nichols asked, with a chill in his heart. It couldn't be Susan? Not Susan.

"On—on the bucket, as a rule. It hangs on a hook just inside the engine-room hatch."

Her eyes were wide on his, worried but not guilty, thank heavens.

"The hatch opening out on to the after-deck?"

"Yes. That's right," she nodded.

"Were they torn when you last used them?"

"No. I don't think so."

"When did you notice they were missing?"

Susan shook her head.

"I didn't. With all this upset and the man with the dog on board keeping everybody off, I haven't been down to swab the decks since yesterday morning and the gloves were there then because I used them."

"That's right," said her father. "And I remember her tossing them over the bucket when she hung it up."

George nodded.

"That's right."

"Mm-mmm. Tom?" The inspector held out his hand and Tom gave him the wrench he had been holding out of sight until this moment. "And this?"

George Field's eyes flickered but he said nothing.

It was Stephen Carter who said, "Yours, isn't it, George?"

George then admitted, reluctantly, that he had one with a nick out of one end like that.

"Also kept in the engine-room?"

"That's right."

"And *when* did you go after that plan?"

George's face lowered mutinously but, at a signal from Stephen, he growled out, "Just before lunch-time yesterday."

"Going through the main cabin past the galley?"

"Right first time!" George sneered faintly.

"Leaving the engine-room unoccupied for someone to take the wrench and the gloves."

George blinked.

"How'd anyone know I wouldn't be there? I didn't tell anyone."

"The after-hatch was open, wasn't it? Anyone'd only have to peep in. As far as we can make out, this whole crime was committed on the spur of the moment, but that doesn't mean that it wasn't timed to a nicety. It was. Must have been. And—we have uncovered yet another reason why it might

have been committed which leaves very few of you without a motive of some kind."

Stephen Carter swung on him sternly.

"What the hell do you mean by that? My wife and daughter—"

"One moment, Mr. Carter," Nichols interrupted smoothly. "We have discovered that Gordoni came out to Australia in the first place by order of his father. That he was planning to sell him out in the matter of the new engine was probably an after-thought. His father sent him out to investigate some highly suspicious juggling that was going on with the company's funds."

"What?"

All eyes swung around automatically to Warren Harris.

He looked as precise as ever and merely lifted his eyebrows.

"That is news to me, Inspector."

"Your chief clerk had reported it to Signor Gordoni, Mr. Harris. Do you mean to say he did not consult you first?"

John Kelleher barked with sudden laughter.

"Hated each other's guts, the pair of them! Jealous as hell!"

Harris's face flushed with anger but his voice was as precise as ever as he ignored Kelleher and replied to the inspector.

"He did not!"

"Tell us what you've found out, Inspector," snapped Stephen.

"Large sums have been . . . diverted, shall we say? At first, they had been reinserted into the books. Then they grew larger until, finally, they were just diverted in such a way as to make it appear as if investments had been made on behalf of the firm."

"Investments?"

Once again all eyes turned to Warren Harris.

"This is a very serious allegation, Inspector," he said. "I take it you have proof of this?"

"A thorough investigation of the accounts might prove it, Mr. Harris, don't you think? In any case, the chief clerk claims to have found proof."

Harris nodded thoughtfully.

"Such an investigation will most certainly be made. Perhaps, if you will allow it, I should set this in motion straight away?"

He half-rose in his chair, placing one hand on either arm to lever himself upwards.

"First—would you mind taking off your jacket?"

Even Tom jumped at the sudden sharpness in Nichols's voice.

Harris froze, half-standing as he was, staring vacantly up at Nichols.

"I—beg your pardon?" he said.

"Would you mind taking off your jacket?"

Harris straightened slowly.

"I'm afraid I'm not prepared to disrobe unless I know you have a perfectly good reason for asking it of me," came the precise reply.

"Well, Mr. Harris, the man who murdered Gordoni wore these gloves and stunned Gordoni with this wrench before drowning him." Several feminine gasps of horror greeted this. Harris's expression did not alter. "The rips in this glove," Nichols poked his fingers through the tears, "we assume to have been made by the cat's claws when she was thrown overboard to create a diversion and draw Mr. Carter away from the starboard side of the boat, which had been chosen by the murderer as the scene for his crime." Further gasps of horror. "Therefore, Mr. Harris, before anybody leaves this room, I would like to see their hands and arms—if you please!"

Quick glances went down to hands and arms. Susan bit her lip as her scratches flared back at her, but Nichols shook his head reassuringly to her startled eyes as they lifted to his, and she remained silent.

"Please, Mr. Harris?"

Harris's hands went slowly to the buttons of his jacket. Slowly he drew it off. Then, quick as light, he hurled it at the inspector's face and, raced through the open glass doors towards the harbour path.

Something large and solid leapt in front of him. A pair of immense arms gathered him into a bear-like hug—and Mr. Harris came to an abrupt halt against Corbett's massive chest.

* * * *

Later that day—

"Un-clunk!" snorted the superintendent as he eyed Inspector Nichols across his office desk while the young man made his final report. "So he owned up, did he?"

"He had scratches on his arms nearly six inches long, sir. Great weals. The cat had made a thorough job of it. Even so, if Harris hadn't panicked at the last moment, it might have been hard to pin it on him. Misappropriation of the company's funds, yes . . . but murder? I wonder!"

"If you'd got enough facts, as I'm always trying to din into your silly heads, you'd have got him without having to rely on claw-marks. I never heard such Tommy Rot!"

"Anyway, they did the trick, sir."

"Well for you!" snarled the superintendent. "Now—what about the filching of that plan, mmm?"

"Property returned to rightful owner and no charges preferred, sir."

"A-r-r-r-r!" growled the superintendent. "People make me sick! Sentimental stuff! Find out what upset the dog that night, then?" he shot at Nichols abruptly.

"It was Field, sir, trying to put the plan back where he'd got it from—Gordoni's cabin on the boat. Hoped it might be left there until everything had blown over, then Carter could send it over to Gordoni's father."

"A likely story! Well, put it all down on paper and get out of here and let me do some work."

"Yes, sir."

Inspector Nichols lost no time in returning to his office where Tom Burton waited for him with lifted eyebrows.

"Well?"

"Start writing the report, my little man."

"Was he satisfied?"

"He didn't raise our salaries, if that's what you mean,"

replied Nichols with his crooked smile. "But he didn't exactly give us the sack, either." He fell into his chair and stretched luxuriously. "So . . . tomorrow I think I'll take some time off in lieu."

Tom's eyes narrowed.

"While I stay in the office and work, is that it?"

"We can't both be out at the same time. Why? Did you want some time as well?" Trevor asked innocently.

"When you look like that . . .!" Tom became extremely wary.

"What's it to be, then?" Trevor went on. "If you want tomorrow I can take the day after instead. It doesn't matter all that much."

"Doesn't it?" warier still.

The crooked grin answered him.

"I'll toss you for it, then. How's that?"

"Oh, brother!" Tom waggled his head. "Something tells me I'm going to regret this—but okay. My penny, though," he insisted. "I'm not taking any chances on you ringing in a double-header."

Trevor was shocked.

"Within these sacred portals?"

"Oh, nuts! Call."

"Heads."

Tom looked down at the back of his hand, then groaned.

"Heads it is."

"You can have the day after. Cheer up."

"I've got a feeling that that'll be too late."

"Too late for what?" Then before Tom could reply, "Come on—let's clear up that report so that I can have the day with a clear conscience."

"Clear conscience!" Tom's eyes rolled to the ceiling. "You don't know the meaning of the word. Heigho! I resign my claim to the fair Susan, if that's what you want," Tom said wickedly.

"Now I wonder where you got the idea . . .?"

"Save it for the customers," Tom advised him. "I'm a detective, remember? And you're a lucky so-and-so. She simply

didn't see me when you were around. Ah well—I'm young yet. Let the old 'uns get off first, I always say. And good luck to you," he added with a grin. "Now—about those report sheets . . ."

CHAPTER XIX

THE NEXT day, with the sun shining brightly once more in the storm-washed sky, the inspector, as bright as the day, hopped into his red Sprite and headed towards Thorntree Point.

By the time he drew up outside the Carter residence, however, a great deal of his self-assurance had left him. He felt like a schoolboy going up for his first exam. Diffidently, he walked down the drive. There was nobody to be seen anywhere. Not even the cat. Nichols felt a sense of let-down, anticlimax, as he walked up to the front door and rang the bell. He had wasted his opportunity. They were all out. He should have phoned first and—

The door was opened by Nancy Field whose smile faded when she saw who it was.

"Oh! Good afternoon, Inspector. There's nothing wrong, I hope?" she asked anxiously.

"No," he smiled. "This is not an official call."

"That's a good thing!" She breathed a sigh of relief. "I think we've had our share for a while." She looked up at him expectantly.

"Er—Mr. Carter at home?"

She shook her head.

"I'm sorry, no. They're both out—taking Mrs. Gordoni to the airport with . . . They're flying him home, you see, and there are things to see to. Tck, tck! What a how-d'you-do it's all been!"

"Yes. Er—I just thought Mr. Carter might like to know what's been going on from our end." He half-turned away, then stopped. "Er—I suppose Miss Carter's not in either?"

"Oh, yes. She's down on the boat. Or can I do anything?"

"No, thanks," he managed to say casually. "I think I'll just wander down and have a word with Miss Carter, if I may, then I'll be off."

"That's all right. You know your way?"

The inspector smiled grimly.

"Yes. I know my way, thanks." And, with a nod, he walked away across the lawn.

He paused at the parapet to look down upon the yacht anchored below. A bright yellow air-bed was stretched out on the stern locker now and, on it, Susan Carter was lying face downwards gazing pensively into the water. She was wearing an emerald green swimsuit that did wonderful things to her red hair and to her figure. The Old Salt was stretched out bonelessly beside her, and the inspector thought they made quite a picture . . . one he could look at for a long time.

But, all was not as peaceful down there as it seemed. Susan stirred restlessly from time to time. She sighed often. Each time, The Old Salt lazily opened her eyes, stretched her front paws luxuriously, and shut her eyes again. If only humans could learn to relax!

Certain human thoughts, however, did not lend themselves to peaceful relaxation. Thoughts such as those troubling Susan at this moment. Thoughts which had troubled her ever since the inspector had taken Warren Harris away and nobody knew when or if they would see him again! The case was closed as far as the Carter household was concerned, her father told her, and there was no longer any reason for the C.I.B. to call. Straight-away, an empty feeling had fallen into her stomach like a stone and had remained there ever since. It seemed such a pity, as she was telling herself at that very moment, to meet someone who was . . . Well, in all this world to find someone who might have been . . . And then to . . . She turned over on her back with another sigh—only to see his face looking down at her from above.

She blinked.

The face was still there.

She sat up.

The face smiled.

"Sorry," called Trevor, "did I startle you?"

He was real!

"Oh—er—no. No. Er—did you want to see Daddy, or something?"

"Not really. May I come down?"

"Of course."

She watched him coming down the path and electricity shot through the places which had been empty a moment before.

Trevor Nichols, however, was not to know this. Her expression told him exactly nothing as he came towards her, so he bent over and scratched The Old Salt where she liked it most.

The cat smiled blissfully and stretched.

"Hi, Puss," he said.

"Do you like cats?" Susan asked, to open the conversation.

"Loathe 'em!" he grinned, scratching on enthusiastically.

She chuckled suddenly.

"There, Puss!" she said. "Remember what I threatened you with?"

Trevor was interested.

"What was that?"

"Oh, just something between The Old Salt and me," she smiled.

"I've wished more than once that this particular cat could talk!" he complained, disgustedly, but his eyes were warm on hers as he spoke, and conversation faltered.

"Er—is it all—over?" she asked hurriedly, having trouble with her breathing.

"Yes. Harris has made a full statement," Nichols replied, while his eyes spoke of other things.

"I still can't believe it!" she said. "He's always been so calm and collected. So—conventional!"

"It turns out that forty thousand pounds had gone. His livelihood would go if Gordoni said the word. I don't suppose he

fancied the disgrace, either. I'd like a pound note for every murderer who has killed to preserve just plain, old-fashioned respectability!"

"But it seems . . . such a paltry reason . . . for taking somebody's life!" Susan exclaimed with horror.

"Yes, but there was more to it than that. Gordoni was trying a little blackmail as well."

"What?" gasped Susan. "And all that was going on while we were cruising peacefully—we thought!—around the harbour?"

"Then—and before."

"Money does horrible things to people, doesn't it?"

Nichols smiled at her.

"Lack of it, yes, sometimes. Anyway, it's all over now. I—er—hope you don't think too badly of me for anything I might have said to you in the course of duty?"

At the look in his eyes, Susan's tongue threatened to tie itself into a knot, but she managed to say, "Of course not."

"Er—like to prove it?"

She glanced up at him, startled.

"What?"

"Would you come out to dinner with me sometime?" he asked. "Tonight, for instance? That is—if you're not already tied up with . . . If Peter Bowers . . .?"

"Peter is—was—only a friend, Inspector."

His heart bounded at the corrected past tense.

"Could you make it Trevor, do you think? And, what about tonight?" He waited for her reply without breathing.

"I'd like that very much," she said, and his lop-sided smile flashed out at her so brilliantly that she found herself as breathless as he appeared to be.

Between them, The Old Salt stretched her claws ecstatically as the finger which had, inexplicably, stopped scratching for some moments now applied itself to her chin with renewed vigour. She closed her eyes with joy while the two pairs of eyes above her head were warm and very busy with each other. And not once, then or later, did Susan Carter think to ask Inspector Nichols if he could make good coffee!